

# NRM

NEW READER MAGAZINE

## HIDING IN PLAIN SIGHT

Vol. 3 Issue 11

New York  
London  
Hong Kong  
Philippines





Natalia Sinelnik

# NEW READER MAGAZINE

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COVER IMAGE

Door 18 - Atlanta Symphony Orchestra by Tiny Doors ATL

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Publicists	: Kota Yamada, TJ Delima
Researchers	: Rosielyn Herrera, Marjon Gonato, John Paul Vailoces

## CONTRIBUTORS

Caitlin Cacciatore, Madison Van Nortwick, Bill Arnott, Tania Mitra, Bradford Middleton, E Penniman James, Joshua Warren, Alana Visser, Ira Meier, Greg Beatty, Max Miller, Chipo Gocha, John Krieg, Preston Taylor Stone, Rebecca Ruth Gould, Annie Raab, Shannon Titus, Louis Aion, Robert Kinerk, Richard Leise, Keith Manos, Alex Wood, Rafiq Ebrahim, Shawn Kobb

## MARKETING AND ADVERTISING

**Laurence Anthony**

[laurence.anthony@newreadermagazine.com](mailto:laurence.anthony@newreadermagazine.com)

## SUBSCRIPTIONS

[subscription@newreadermagazine.com](mailto:subscription@newreadermagazine.com)

[www.newreadermagazine.com](http://www.newreadermagazine.com)

Phone: 1 800 734 7871

Fax: (914) 265 1215

Write to us: 100 Church St. Suite 800 New York, NY 10007

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## NOTE

The other day, I met—well, not really, I just saw one of his videos—Johann Hari. He wrote a book called *Lost Connections*, where he uncovers causes of depression and anxiety. He points out that in the early stages of mankind, humans were able to survive and thrive in the wilderness, not because they were any bigger or any smarter than all the other animals, but because humans were good at working together and communicating with one another as a tribe.

Now I won't say that this generation isn't constantly communicating with one another—I mean, we can even be obsessed with it! I just think that it's easy to miss out on opportunities or decline human connection because of so many distractions from streaming sites, social media, video games, etc. I'm not saying they're bad because I'm always grateful for it. Without these inventions I wouldn't be able to reach the artists I've talked to or the talented contributors, and well—you! This online publication brings us closer, and makes us grow familiar with each other even without meeting in person.

I think that's what this quarter is all about—the things we miss out on all the time, but always had right in front of us. I must say that this quarter was fun to make. It was a bit longer, and the process was more patient compared to the others we've had. It took its time, and took a lot of effort in listening and observing, carefully trying its best to get a message across.

And alas, the message is here, so thank you for being our dear reader.

Karen Anderson-Singer, the artist behind *Tiny Doors ATL* is with us this quarter, and I'm excited for you guys to read and get to know her! And just like last year, we have new music for you. Two bands—*The Metro Fantastic* and *Intertwined*—join us this issue, and share songs that will undoubtedly be part of *New Reader Mixtape 2020—The Pandemic Playlist*? Ha-ha!

We'll think of a better name.

In the meantime, here's *Hiding in Plain Sight*. I hope you enjoy the stories, the poetry (there's a lot), the people, and of course, the adopted artworks! I took the liberty of submitting something of my own, too:



They wouldn't let me put it with a story but I can put it here because I have full jurisdiction on this page.

On behalf of the team and the contributors, thank you for being part of another quarter. Despite the challenges, it's nice to know you're there and supporting the world of arts and literature. Stay safe, dear readers!

K

P.S. We have a new layout artist. Welcome to the team, Nel!

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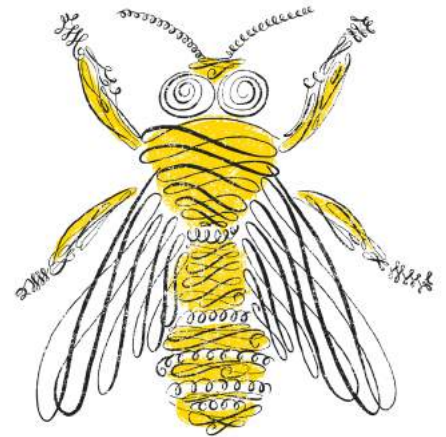
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## New Reader Media

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- NRM takes on the challenge of bookmarking emerging voices in the indie publishing world, presented in random order.



# Bill Arnott's Beat



# Book Signing and Saying Yes

I was doing a book signing—a suburban retail outlet, trying not to get lost in sprawling square footage. Had a tidy little table near the front, wedged between a promotional booth and Starbucks. There were glossy signs promoting the event—my name, remarkably, spelled correctly. Things looked promising. Buyers were even queued before my opening, friendly people keen to visit, requesting signed copies of my Viking-themed travel memoir. We clicked selfies in horned headwear. It was all rather awesome.

The afternoon wore on. Enthusiasm waned, along with my breath mints. My throat was velvet smooth. My breath, evergreen fresh. But the queued book buyers? Well, they'd gone the way of my dodo-like Tic Tacs. So I did my best to look busy behind my table, desperate for someone, anyone, to talk to.

Then something wondrous occurred. One of those instances when things fall karmically into place. Fact is, I'd given up. Despite best efforts, I sell the same number of books per unit of time, anywhere, anytime. I feel privileged. At times, delighted. Other times, exasperated. But it never changes. Simple math eclipses aspiration, every time. I ought to remember that. But I won't.

It was then the remarkable ensued—a Frank Capra moment, surging instrumental that lets everyone know, even if you're not paying attention, that something special is happening. As I mentioned, I'd thrown in the towel (for the moment), deciding a break was in order—a coffee to muddy my air-freshener breath.

So I bumbled into a sort-of lineup. There was no discernible queue. Those of us there looked at each other, shrugged, and did our best to form a schoolyard line, which wasn't easy. A lone woman in our clump smiled, nodding in my direction. I returned the salutation. Then a server made eye contact with me. I indicated the smiling woman should be served next. The server complied. But smiley was certain I was next in line. So she ordered her coffee and insisted on buying whatever I was having, one of those pay-it-forward moments we love and first witnessed in that movie with the child actor with three names. What I felt in that moment was optimism in humanity.

My inclination was to decline, with thanks. An obligatory, "I couldn't possibly ..." But something I remembered from years prior—the teachings of bodhisattvas and possibly Ann Landers—went ping. When offered a gift from a stranger, a stranger with good intent, always accept with a simple thank you. My dad never read Landers (he may've touched on Buddhism in one of our Time Warner compilations), but being Scottish, he knew damn well to simply say thanks to free coffee. And so I did, knowing in my heart Siddhārtha, dad, and Ann would approve.

Back at the table of books, sipping deliciously free java, I had more genuine visits, kind people with stories to share. And then another remarkable encounter ensued. A middle-aged guy with the energy of a sugared-up tween came at me with an onslaught of enthusiasm and smiles. He knew everyone. Anyone he didn't know intimately, he'd worked with. He told me of his time travelling and fighting fires. He told me of his manuscript, literary praise, and his pride in the craft. It was simply a matter of time before our Venn diagrams intersected. Which they did. His editorial consultant and mentor was the same guy

who made up half the judging panel who scrutinized my very work stacked on the table—the award that earned a sticker on the cover and got me a year's worth of speaking gigs. Small world? Maybe. But I suspect given enough time this affable guy would find the thing or things he has in common with anyone, and everyone.

"Wait here!" he said, like a kid on Christmas morning, "I got a book for you!" And he was off, speed-walking at an Olympic pace.

I figured I'd be getting a copy of his book, and maybe we'd do the author swap thing. But no, there was simply a title he wanted me to read. So as well as buying my book, he found the other title on the shelves, went back to the till, paid for everything, then brought me this additional book as a gift. He wrote a fun inscription, listing the people we both knew, along with his nickname, so I'd remember who he was. Which of course I will. The kindness of strangers.

Maybe that, more than anything, is why we say yes. Yes to leaving the house. Yes to meeting new individuals. Yes to leaping from our comfort zones. Yes to the unknown. And yes to the goodness of people. Oh, the book he bought me? Well, that's another story.

\*\*\*



Author, poet, songwriter Bill Arnott is the bestselling author of *Gone Viking: A Travel Saga*, *Dromomania*, and *Allan's Wishes*. His Indie Folk album is *Studio 6*. He's received awards for poetry, prose, and songwriting. When not writing, performing, or trekking the globe with a pack and a journal, Bill can usually be found having a pint and misbehaving with friends on Canada's west coast. [www.amazon.com/author/billarnott\\_aps](http://www.amazon.com/author/billarnott_aps) ■



# Caitlin Cacciatore

INTVW BY KEITH AYUMAN



**NRM: With the pandemic going on, how are you and how is your artistic soul?**

**Caitlin Cacciatore:** I am dealing as best as I can. It's touch and go some days. I am feeling less inspired than usual, to be perfectly honest. I am looking forward to the autumn and long walks as the trees change color—I am hoping to find a wellspring of inspiration somewhere.

**NRM: What do you think is the best thing about being a writer? (And the worst?)**

**CC:** The best thing about being a writer is being elevated to the status of Goddess in whatever universe you are creating. You are in complete control.

The most dreadful thing about being a writer is being asked, "Where do you get your ideas?" Do I answer, "Everywhere? Nowhere? From my Muses? Who knows? Not I!"

**NRM: Who were your early influences in writing?**

**CC:** I must confess that as a girl, I kept some of the poems of Sara Teasdale on my bedroom wall. I would look at them every day, and run my fingers along the lengths of the lines. I would read them to myself and remind myself that yes, life does have loveliness to sell, and as soon as I was old enough I was going to buy it, as Teasdale suggested, without counting the cost.

I also must credit my third/fifth grade elementary school professor, Ms. Carnevale. I wrote a Halloween poem about a witch and if I remember correctly, it ended up both on my mother's fridge and Ms. Carnevale's chalkboard. She was one of the first people who recognized talent and a love for language in me, and she did everything she could to foster it.

And not least of all was my mom, who gave me an unlimited library card account at the age of three. I would go on to take full advantage of that. I was and remain a voracious reader. Give me a book and I will consume it.

**NRM: Personally, what do you think is a writer's role in society?**

**CC:** Writers have a moral obligation to present their truth to the world, both the world of today and the world of tomorrow. There is no such thing as a writer who can be taken out of her socio-political and spatiotemporal context.

That is not to say that the writer has the same obligation as the journalist, or the historian. The job of the faithful historian and chronicler is to let the future know in no uncertain terms what happened, where, and why. It falls to the writer to illuminate the human costs and benefits, the losses and the gains, how it felt when what happened in such and such a place on such and such a date. Sometimes, a single poem—say, an elegy written by a widow of war—can have more emotional impact than a figure in a book informing the reader that nine hundred souls were lost in a particular battle. At some point, the geometry and calculus of war becomes rote—Herbert says it best in his poem “Mr. Cogito Reads the Newspaper”: “it’s no use trying to find / 120 lost men on a map... they don’t speak to the imagination / there are too many of them.”

He calls this the arithmetic of compassion. Poetry, and literature in general, tip the scales back into the court of compassion and empathy, and this, perhaps, is the greatest accomplishment of our language – we can record our emotions in the guise of a poem or a verse, and someone a thousand years later can read it and recognize the same passions in their own hearts.

**NRM: How different was your life ever since you started writing?**

**CC:** I have been writing the majority of my life—I began writing short stories and poems at the age of 7 or 8, and began a serious quest to conquer my first million words by the age of 12. I am one of those people who cannot imagine a life without writing. Take away my keyboard and hide my pens and paper, and I’d be lost. Writing is an integral part of who I am, and who I’ve always imagined myself being.

**NRM: Apart from writing, what are other things you love doing? Any hidden talents?**

**CC:** I love reading. I can draw fairly well—and I’m an ace at charcoal. I took a class with a local artist and family friend in my teen years, and became rather accomplished in that medium. I also cook, and tend a small garden.

**NRM: What more can we expect from Caitlin Cacciatore?**

**CC:** Expect a chapbook within the next year or two. I am working on several projects, including a chapbook about the A Train that would make a great souvenir from those visiting NYC, a chapbook meditating on the legend of Icarus in various poems, and a collection of poems on mourning. I’ve felt compelled recently to chronicle life during the pandemic and capture the zeitgeist of the state of upheaval and the time of tidal changes we are currently living through. Long-term, you can expect novels—space opera, #ownvoices romance, fantasy, and the like. I am in the early stages of what I hope will be my debut novel.



# Madison Van Nortwick

INTVW BY NEIL GABRIEL NANTA

**NRM: How are you holding up in these trying times? What keeps you occupied?**

**Madison Van Nortwick:** I have spent my time in quarantine with my dog and my boyfriend in Phoenix, Arizona. We have been staying sane by doing little weekend trips to northern Arizona since Phoenix has been consistently over 100 degrees. When it is bearable outside, we play tennis, go on hikes, or have drinks on a patio.

**NRM: Can you tell us a little bit about yourself?**

**MVN:** I was born in Denver, Colorado and grew up mostly in Kansas. I went to school at the University of Kansas and moved to Phoenix after graduation.

**NRM: How do you decide what topic or subject to write on? Where do you get your ideas?**

**MVN:** When writing short stories, I am usually inspired by my own life or the lives of people near me. I then twist the story to be something a bit more interesting or funny or sad. I usually have a story idea in my head for weeks or months and will write little bits in my phone's notes as they come to me until I finally decide to sit down and write it.

**NRM: What inspired you to write "Marigold"? Is there a deeper story behind it?**

**MVN:** Marigold was inspired by my grandma, Joyce, who passed in 2011. My Grandma and I were close and I spent a lot of time at her house and even lived with her in

middle school. She was diagnosed with Dementia when I was in middle school. I decided to write this story from the perspective of a young child because I wanted to show how sad and confusing Dementia is, which is highlighted by the naivety of childhood.

**NRM: If you had the opportunity to live in any time in history and write a story about it, which era would you choose?**

**MVN:** If I could write in any time in history, I would probably go back to when my family was young. I would love to see the dynamic my mother had with her mom when she was a teenager, or what my father was like in 5th grade. I like to write interpersonal stories, so I would love to find out what small dynamics my family had before I existed.

**NRM: How would you describe a successful person?**

**MVN:** To me, being successful would mean having enough money to afford my dog's constant vet visits from eating weird bugs, loving my job, and maybe living in a cabin in the mountains. Also, lots of coffee available at all times.

**NRM: What keeps you going?**

**MVN:** What keeps me going is speaking with friends and family regularly, writing and reading when I can, and getting outside whenever possible.



# Making M

BLACK  
LIVES  
MATTER

# Walls Talk

by Kyla Estoya

#TINY  
DOORS  
ATL

Door 2 - Atlanta BeltLine - Old 4th Ward



At first, and for the longest time, I've misjudged these tiny doors as a bunch of artsy installations where the creator was just really obsessed about placing them all over Atlanta.

But nope, they're not.

The more I learned about this project—and when I finally met and talked to the artist behind it—Tiny Doors ATL showed me something bigger than I failed to see, and I feel so foolish for not seeing it.

KarenAnderson\_06

Krog Street Tunnel is the birthplace of Tiny Doors ATL.

Days, weeks, and months after installing the first door, items such as tiny newspapers, tiny packages, and even tiny kittens were left in front of Door #1. Karen Anderson-Singer, the pink-haired principal artist of this project, just started conversation with the neighborhood without actually talking to the whole neighborhood.

2020 is Tiny Doors ATL's sixth year, and not only did it grow (figuratively), it also expanded its conversation by interacting with the public in new and different ways. And with this global crisis happening—on top of a bunch of other social issues going on—Karen focused on doing more of the things she loves while still

staying true as to why she started Tiny Doors ATL in the first place.

At the spike of the anti-racial and #BlackLivesMatter movement, a lot of artists, brands, and even prominent people, have expressed their thoughts and outlook about the movement. Karen herself didn't have second thoughts as to whether or not she would stand up for the rights of others, because to her, it hits close to home.

"I think as a queer person it wasn't a huge jump for me to join a protest," Karen stated, "It's not as though activism is new to me, so when people are standing up for the rights of black people, it absolutely matters to me."



Georgia Aquarium Door



*i don't have to  
Wonder if i  
should take a  
stand because  
i know i should.*

Door 10W - Grant Park

"She mentioned about her rainbow door—the only tiny door she has full jurisdiction on—and how she immediately painted a #BlackLivesMatter sign on it: "That's the way I can take action. It's not necessarily in a protest but it's on the wall for everyone to see. And it felt like a way that I can be present [in the movement] all the time."

Inviting curiosity and imagination is something Tiny Doors ATL is known for. But I must say that these cute installations have more to them than just being adorable. The project invites you to be part of a conversation far-reaching within and outside its community.

Karen told me that during the first few months of the pandemic, a huge company offered her a giant project which she then turned down.

"What really fuels and motivates me this year has been what I say yes and no to," she stated. Karen wanted to offer something to everyone. So she thought of working with a teacher, and they both created a free lesson plan for students and other teachers to use. Accessibility had always been at the front of Karen's mind so it's no surprise that the lesson plan she created uses sidewalk chalk, the sidewalk, and nothing else. The project focused on finding ways to connect with the community even if they're doing it alone. "It felt like exactly what I was supposed to do this year. I could have taken another big gig, and I'm not going to say I didn't want to," she said, "...but I needed to put that out in order to feel like I was still true to why I started this project."

In this age of transparency, Karen expressed that certain brands or companies get caught up with too much positivity, when what people really want is the truth. For her, Tiny Doors ATL isn't much about seeing the bright side of things all the time.

Sometimes people steal, destroy, or do other terrible and awful things to her doors but Karen doesn't conclude people are bad: "Some people would tell me, 'Why don't you talk more about the horrible things [they do to the door]?'. I don't want to because if I make one post, there will be comments saying "People are terrible!" or "People suck!" No, that's not true. Someone was in a bad mood. It's not about me or you. It happens."

However, Karen admits that it does hurt her feelings or breaks her heart a little every time she comes across one of her doors ruined, but she accepts the reality and moves on. "The other truth is, most of the time, people are pretty great. They have made this project into something that has been a career for me. Yes, I can keep going but only if the people are loving it. There's a way to look at it where you are being honest and not overly one or the other. It's a mixed bag, just like life!"

Tiny Doors ATL is constantly communicating with its neighborhood and with the conversation it creates, it's only right for the artist behind it to listen:



Door 9 - Inman Park



The Tiny Street



Door 4, the Tiny Library - Decatur Square (Little Shop of Stories)

*"it's important that artists should listen and respond to what's happening around them."*



Door 658 - Atlanta BeltLine



Karen-KeyToTheCity

Karen emphasized, “And they should try not to obsess themselves with inaction. Sometimes I get caught up in moments where I feel like what I create is not going to be perfect. So when it’s not, I just have to forgive myself for the imperfections and let it happen. Little mistakes shouldn’t stop me from moving forward.”

Karen is known for her craft in recreating reality by making miniature things since she was young, but other than that passion, what she does isn’t just about tiny things; it’s about the people, the community, and creating a special moment between the doors and for anyone who finds them.

Every time she’s outside repairing a door, she has often heard people talking about her tiny doors being hidden all over Atlanta. But according to her, they’re not hidden. None of them are. They’re as visible as she can possibly make them. They’re just small, and that smallness makes them feel like they’re hidden. “That made me realize that it’s a feeling [I give to people], it’s not a fact,” she said,

“this project gives people a feeling that you found something, and that’s what makes it feel like they’re hidden. i don’t have to hide it to make it feel like you’ve found something”.



Fox Theatre

Public art is what most of what Karen thinks about and does. Being a part of Atlanta Beltline Public Art Counsel, she advocates and facilitates in making the world a better place through public art. And as an artist herself, she makes sure to look out and speak on behalf of the artists.

“I work six days a week, being Tiny Doors ATL,” Karen said while giving me a glimpse of her studio (which was not tiny), and showed me her set of tiny tents she was making. “Right now I am making tiny camping trips and tiny little beach scenes. This is where I am all day every day.”

Karen and Tiny Doors ATL encourage communication in a community, probably one of the basic needs of humanity. And despite all the apps and software that allows us to talk to people anytime we want, we sometimes fail to listen and have an actual conversation with anyone.

So yes they’re adorable, colorful, and tiny. I would enjoy the sight of those doors when I see one in real life, but it’s more fascinating knowing something so small—and voiceless—can talk the loudest and create a big influence, not only in Atlanta, but also around the world.

###

You can find Tiny Doors ATL Lesson plan over [here](#).



# PARBAT

Photos taken from The Metro Fantastic's and  
Intertwined's Facebook pages.



# FEELS

Aira Calina

A normal pre-pandemic workday for me involved waking up from a bland sleep set against an unremarkable backdrop of the unlikely combination of stale vices and fresh laundry, with the only consolation being the soundtrack to my slumber: my Spotify sleep playlist. While dressing up, I would pick out another playlist to get me either hyped for the day, or have me rushing because it was a cold night and I woke up late. At work, I'd put on my earphones, listen to my work playlist and write the 9-5 away. If it still isn't obvious by now, I'm saying music can make me do things. But while I'm always down for some fresh stuff, I can only count in one hand all the times I've been genuinely moved by new tunes... which is why I have an ever-changing playlist of whatever are my current favorites (as of this writing, it only has 4 songs).

Before most of the world was brought to a standstill by this unforeseen foe, I came across two musical treasures that I instantly knew I was going to have on repeat and talk about, and I can't wait to introduce the amazing people behind them.

# Now playing: Put That Down — The Metro Fantastic

That brief night out wasn't part of the itinerary.

My workmates and I went to Manila for one thing: to cover an event. That's it. The 3 ½ days we spent in the condo we rented was the closest we got to making it a vacation. When all the work stuff was finished, it was time to fly back—but fate decided it was not before doing something soul-nourishing. Because as boring as I've become, I landed this job because I still loved the arts.

About three hours before our flight back to our city, a Manila friend took us on a last minute visit to a cozy and homey music venue along Katipunan Ave. in Quezon City. We went in and I thought, "cute place," trying to avoid feelings of awkwardness because everyone seemed to know everyone while we were only there for a couple hours. It didn't take us long to realize Route 196 wasn't the place for such thoughts. We sat in a corner and enjoyed the good food and good indie music. It was fun. Plain, simple fun. Just. Fun... Until **The Metro Fantastic** went on stage. All the other bands were great, too, but there was something that drew us to TMF. I listened to them play, watched them perform in a way so enchanting, it made my heart ache. I looked at my friends and saw how truly happy we were that evening. It was one for the books; it was guaranteed a special place in our journals and diaries.

So we decided we wanted to meet them. This time, though, fate wasn't too friendly. We'd planned to do a live interview, but for everyone's safety amidst everything, we ended up deciding to meet and have a little chat with one of the guys from the band, their vocalist, **Carlos Castaño**, via email and messenger. Here's what I got out of that nice Q&A we had going:

**The Metro Fantastic** is made up of guys from all over the country. Carlos toured and performed with his band in several international music festivals and in 2014, performed at the Singapore Grand Prix with **Michael Gemina** (drums and vocals) and **Choi Padilla** (keys, synths, and vocals). When Mike got back from Singapore in 2017, and Carlos wanted something different, they decided to put TMF together. The band's sound is made complete by **Justin Pleno** on percussions, **Kurt Ebarita** on vocals and guitar, **Kris Malana** on lead guitar, and **Harrold Go** on bass and vocals. After a few months of jamming, TMF was born. Fast

forward to a few years later, they're still a family.

The TMF members rightfully take pride in the edge brought about by their ages. "We love [being this deep into the music scene]. We're all slightly older and more experienced than most of the scene so it gives us a unique perspective of "the game". We all have jobs so we're not in it for anything besides having a good show, eating food after, and just really spending time with friends."

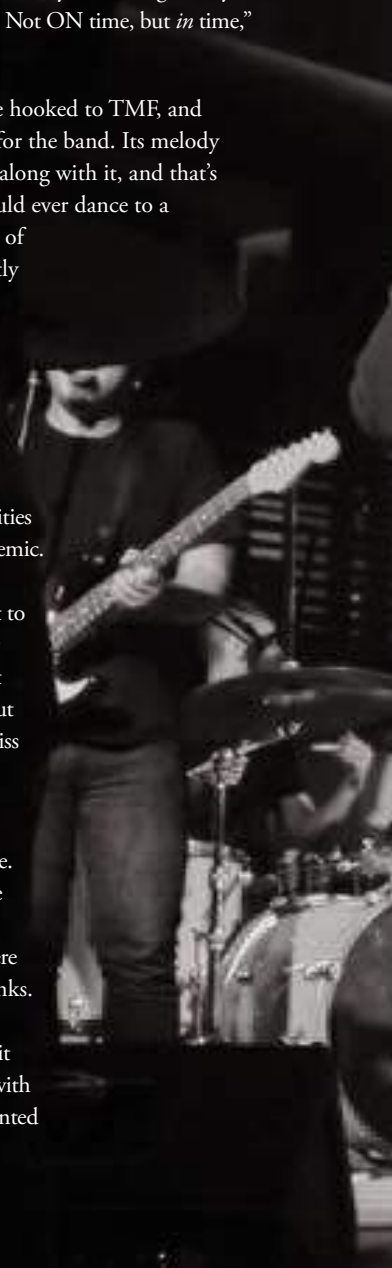
Since the guys had already basked in the music scene by the time they decided to put the band together, they were able to skip all that newbie stress, citing 'scheduling' as the biggest struggle they've had to overcome since there's quite a lot of them.

If there's one thing made obvious by our interaction thus far, apart from their mastery in music, it's that TMF isn't your typical bunch of imagination-lacking band members. In all the shows they've done at Red Ninja fests, they performed the Avengers theme for their intro, also hinting at the geeks that they are. "We're definitely not boring. And you can say that we live life in rhythm, in time. Not ON time, but *in* time," Carlos remarks.

"Put That Down" is the song that got me hooked to TMF, and it incidentally was the first song written for the band. Its melody and beat would get any listener to move along with it, and that's something because I never thought I would ever dance to a song in a place away from home and full of strangers. It's track number 5 in their aptly named EP, which is also their setlist for their live shows. "[I]t's called Dance! because, well... that's what it's meant to make you do. No judgement, no poise whatsoever," Carlos notes. I've never felt more redeemed.

It goes without saying that the band's activities had to be put on hold because of the pandemic. Since TMF is a band that mainly performs live, Carlos mentioned how it'll be difficult to replicate what they do via Zoom and other video messaging apps and sites. "So we just stopped. We miss hanging out, laughing out loud with strangers; SaGuijo, Route, we miss the scene."

With all that's going on, succumbing to stress and all that it entails is the easy choice. Talking with Carlos, however, proved to be a much-needed breath of fresh air. He was chill, and talked about the band like we were chatting over Deviled Chx and some drinks. There wasn't any air of *stuck-upness* at all. I think that says a lot about the band, and it also shows in how unpretentious they are with the sound they want to make. "We just wanted



something fun and groovy. Something we'd enjoy playing live—if it doesn't feel good playing live, then why even do it?". And when I asked if they think their listeners are hearing the same sounds as they are, he said "I think so, we've never had a boring gig yet."

I love The Metro Fantastic. I love their songs, I enjoy their craft, and now, I admire their humility despite the lengths they've already reached. I asked how much of their goals have changed, if at all, and the same grounded character is evident. "I can't speak for the rest of the band but I just wanna live by the beach, own a cafe, surf, ride my bicycle, and play music. Same, same."

The Metro Fantastic is currently signed with Ditto Music and they only have great things to say about the indie artist's best friend.

"I love them, Jinno is as real as real can get, and badass too. So yeah that was cool, they helped us figure stuff out a lot."

At the moment, more music is being written and that gives us all something to look forward to!



Photo taken from The Metro Fantastic's Facebook pages.

# Now playing: Ring Ring – Intertwined

It was another lazy day at my only chill-out place.

Most of my partner's and my friends have either landed jobs or found new boyfriends or girlfriends, and so there wasn't much going on. There were only about three or four of us there. We played the usual songs, ordered the same menu items, stared at the same walls. We were enjoying the lull, when all of a sudden, one of our friends said, "Have you heard this song?" and then proceeded to look up a track on Spotify.

When "Ring Ring" played, I felt a surge of emotions in a matter of seconds. The musicality, the vocals, all those instruments seamlessly *intertwined* with each other—I couldn't put it into words then. When the same friend said they were based locally and in the same city as I was, I knew exactly what I wanted to do.

As was the case for TME, I initially planned on meeting **Intertwined** for a live interview. My team at work was already looking into doing a photoshoot, but in this already-all-too-familiar tale, we had to reconsider. Despite further troubles with email servers and my own procrastination habits getting in the way, we did manage to have a lovely talk. Here are the best bits from my chat with the couple, band leader **Henrick Pestaño** and lead singer/songwriter **Amanda Gabucan**:

**Intertwined** started off as a Henrick-Mandy duo in 2018. Later, Henrick decided to call on friends to help them create a "larger and better" sound for the band. These friends are **Ray Miguel Sabanpan** on guitar, **Jkoi Galanida** on bass, **Joshua Culanag** on drums, **Ron Liston** on alto saxophone, **Elyr Gressin** on tenor saxophone, and **Welth Villarba** and **Nico Cortes** on trumpets. The band expands to up to 16 members with backup singers and percussionists.

When a friend told them about San Miguel Wanderbattle, the group read about it and made one of the best decisions they could for the band: they "dove head first" into it... and the rest is history. They were ultimately named Wanderband 2019, reigning victorious among other greats in the local indie scene.

You would think the band would at least develop some sort of warranted superiority after such feat, but nah. They weren't too big on the competition side of things—what they were truly after was the fun and inclusivity it cultivated. "Music is for everybody. We just love



what we're doing and I'm pretty sure that other bands feel the same way. It was an honor though, having been given the chance to share the stage with other talented musicians who share the same passion as us," Henrick recounted. Talk about unassuming talent!

With a band their size, I couldn't help but wonder just which ways the ideas would flow. Though very much open to exploring different genres, Henrick loves listening to Gospel music. Mandy's taste is largely influenced by Amy Winehouse, Erykah Badu, Aretha Franklin, Mac Miller, and Rex Orange County. In my humble music-loving opinion, their song "Blessed" is a great example of their influences coming together to create an auditory treat. Intertwined's synergy is too great to be swayed by varying opinions and preferences.

To touch on some light technicality, Henrick details the band's creative process as follows:

1. Mandy writes the lyrics.
2. Henrick makes the arrangements.
3. The rest of the band tosses in their input and ideas that might improve it.

"One great thing about our band is that everyone has something great to offer," Henrick expressed, and it's reflected on the songs they've released.



Photo taken from Intertwined's Facebook pages.

For Intertwined, being in a band is more than just being able to play with people on other instruments. To them, it's like having another family, another set of people who have their backs. So strong is their bond that they're all able to look back and see only the good times they've had together. They don't only come together for band rehearsals, they actually spend time hanging out as friends, so this pandemic has truly affected them a different way too. Despite the safety protocols slightly easing up a bit, none of them have had the chance to actually go and meet like they would in the relatively more normal days.

Fortunately, they're still able to virtually come together, to celebrate each other's birthdays, for example, and they even made a few quarantine jams in their free time. Nothing beats performing together live, but they're well aware of the importance of playing long-distance, at least for now. "Something good that came out of quarantine, is that we were able to write more songs to add to our portfolio, but other than that, we would really love to see each other in person and maybe jam or rehearse when we have the chance."

Their love for music is apparent, not only in their tracks, but also in the way they put their releases together: obviously enjoying it. "For me, I've always wanted to be a singer songwriter because all I've ever known and am sure of in life is music," Mandy shared, to which Henrick adds, "For me, being a musician is priceless. I love playing in front of people and showcasing my God-given talent."

Out of the many traits an artist could have, I'm always drawn the easiest to humility. When asked if they were expecting to be as successful as they are now, here's what they had to say: "We're all just doing our best to be the best versions of ourselves and all that we have achieved is a product of that. We have big goals set for ourselves and honestly, whatever happens, happens. We're just hoping that it's all for the best."

Does that mean there's more of Intertwined to watch out for?

"As soon as things get better, and people are allowed to hold live gigs again, we have a lot in store for our listeners. We have new songs and hopefully, we'll be able to push our first album launch that was postponed due to COVID."

Well, that's an obvious sign for great days ahead!

Finding artists to introduce to the world isn't easy. With the immense amount of unquantifiable talent and artistry across the world and back, it's a dauntingly beautiful task that I have to do every quarter. But it's this stumbling upon hidden gems that almost always happens that makes it an easy favorite out of everything I do.



Photos taken from The Metro Fantastic's  
and Intertwined's Facebook pages.

# GET TO KNOW THE BANDS

**NRM: What is/are your favorite original song/s, collective or not?**

**Carlos of TMF:** I personally like performing “The Shakes” and “Panther”, they make me move the most.

**Mandy of Intertwined:** For me, it's kind of hard to choose a favorite Intertwined song because I'm my own biggest critic! But one song that means a whole lot to me is “Be Mine”. It started off as a song I just wrote on my ukulele one day and as soon as Henrick got his hands on it, he transformed the song into something so beautiful and I just never realized that it had *that* much potential. It makes me extremely happy to hear other people singing along to it.

**NRM: Please share to me and our readers something about being musicians that most people don't know.**

**Carlos of TMF:** This is a good one. We're nerds and geeks usually. Be it video games, PC setups, Lego (me), among many other things, we like our little toys and sub-culture stuff. Gogo and Choi are heavily into building their PC rigs, Mike and I are bicycle fiends, Kurt's a sneakerhead, we're all geeks. We're not as cool as people think. Except me, I'm exactly the amount of cool you think—which is zero.

**Intertwined:** Being in the music industry isn't all fun and games. You have to be strong enough to endure a lot of rejection and keep your head up no matter what. Trust the process.

**NRM: What would you like to say to those who are only starting out, especially with COVID-19 putting a halt to everything?**

**Carlos of TMF:** Just do it, do it for the best reasons. That it sets fire to your heart, that it gives your soul wings, that it moves you in ways you never knew you could be moved. Do it for you. Not for the crowd, or the recognition, that shit fades. Do it because it give you JOY, peace, and that it excites you. And above all, do it with love.

**Intertwined:** Don't lose faith when things don't go your way because it doesn't always click right in the beginning. Just keep doing you even if the people surrounding you might have a different opinion about your passion. This applies to more than just music.

**NRM: Why “The Metro Fantastic”?**

**TMF:** Because I'm *maarte*.

**NRM: Why “Intertwined”?**

**Intertwined:** The name “Intertwined” has a lot to do with our work ethic. Like I mentioned before, we all have our roles in the band to make everything easy going while getting a lot done in the process. We're also intertwined in our own ways with how we're connected as people.





# ON DOUBT

Annie Raab

**"On Doubt"** won the 2019 Fall Literary Award at Virginia Tech in the creative nonfiction category. It was nominated for the AWP Intro Journals Award.

**B**uddha was decapitated last night," my mother said. "I just found his head in the grass."

It was the early 2000s, and our two foot tall ceramic Buddha sat cross-legged on the porch, facing the quiet yard and one way street in a neighborhood where the worst that happened usually happened because of me. This time, I was perfectly innocent. Even shocked to see the evidence of this unnecessary crime. I was pretty fond of standing on the porch with my hand on the Buddha's head, feeling the rough texture evenly applied on the peak of his curls. I felt the texture beneath my fingers again the morning my mother walked into the kitchen and dropped Siddhartha's head on the table.

My brother and I gawked at the sight. The serene smile remained unchanged, as if he had attained nirvana at last. I followed my mother to the porch and saw the empty body on the planter, same as before, legs crossed in patient meditation.

"Should we glue it back on?" I asked while my mother searched for neck shrapnel in the yard. She looked up at me and held out a palm full of broken bits.

"We'd better try," she said. "For karma."

We were all anxious about karma in the Bush years. My mother and her partner could not legally marry, but cohabited the same home and turned their preoccupations to a brand of spirituality not expressed inside the walls of nearby churches. Poor Buddha was the victim of the antithesis of Buddhism, and as we tried to reattach the head to the body, my mother and I asked in stunned confusion: "Who would do this to the Buddha?"

We did not know. We didn't even know if there existed a religion directly opposed to the nonviolent beliefs in Buddhism, and could only point to George Bush and his fervent belief in the reconnection of church and state as evidence for escalating intolerance in the world. We ourselves lacked conviction and immersion in any ritual necessary to achieve a perfect soul, but looking around our house, one might have guessed we had a schizophrenic relationship to

the holy. In addition to the Siddhartha on the porch, we had miniatures of the fat, laughing Buddha above the television, a Mayan calendar in the dining room, brass bells and prayer flags in the bookcase, and vague spiritual affirmations stuck onto cork boards and the refrigerator. We accumulated these knick knacks slowly and without evidence that our accumulation might lead to a higher understanding of our souls and selves. Our interest in Eastern spirituality was “suburban scholarly”—detached from a personal history of the beliefs, from persecution, from any concrete understanding of the rituals beyond what could be communicated in a trinket.

But to me, they were tools imbued with mysterious powers that could guarantee my soul safety if I could learn to use them the correct way. If I could build my toolbox for spiritual enlightenment, fill my brain with the nuances of process and site-specific ritual, I could transcend all the dumb earthly shit I was beholden to as a teenager. For Christmas, I received a pendulum, a crystal pyramid, and polished stones with obscure uses and meanings implied by their color or origins. I smuggled incense into my room and stared at the ribbons of smoke until my mind went into blank meditation. I read books about astral projection and lucid dreaming, books about travelers making a religious pilgrimage to strange, holy lands, and books aimed to teach spell casting to beginners. All this made me a believer—if not in God, then at least in a safe, bourgeois brand of magic, one that I could master with the proper gadgets.

After a childhood filled with agnostic indifference, being surrounded by so many options for religious experimentation in my teenaged years sent me into unexpected spiritual uncertainty. I imagined the religious figures I recognized in images—Buddha, Shiva, Itzamna, Jesus—beside writers of the spiritual books that filled our shelves: Hermann Hesse, Joseph Campbell, Deepak Chopra, Eckhart Tolle, and Carl Jung. They all sat on a panel of judgment waiting for me to choose the correct answer to life’s unanswerable question. The pressure to commit to any religion, even as a half-hearted slouch in a family that demanded no religious affiliation, was more than I could handle. But I took matters into my own hands to attempt to achieve a higher state of being. I wrote private chants for forgiveness and tucked them inside the crystal pyramid. I used my pendulum to douse pockets of positive energy in the house. I rubbed my crystals and stones to heal the faults in my eternal soul. Each time I felt certain I had found the path to redemption, I slipped up by shoplifting more crystals or tiny Buddha figurines, falling asleep during meditation, or dropping lucky pennies on strangers’ heads from the second floor of Mayfair Mall.

Although my family is not religious, we have at least *attempted* to accept religion into our lives by attending

services at the Unitarian Universalist Church of the West. The squat building outside of town held loosely religious gatherings for community-seeking liberals. Their aim was to expose the congregation to as many religions as possible, weaving philosophies from all over the world into a consistent message that reiterated tolerance, acceptance, and love. The Unitarian reverend was a kind woman with beaded necklaces that hung down on her flowing kaftan, and silver hair cropped short above her ears. She welcomed my family each time we walked through the doors and imparted a sense of peace and hospitality—a well-being I would recognize in the congregation one hour later as we all walked back to our cars. Her sermons were beautiful, humble. I could not be dragged to them without a fight. In order to prevent a public outburst during the Sunday service, my mother plunked me down in the basement with the other kids to attend the worldly Unitarian version of Sunday school. Visited upon us were all the practitioners of spiritual fringes. I learned the suggestive rhetoric of Tarot, Wiccan rituals re-imagined as an earthy, kid-friendly séance, Biblical interpretations that accepted without consequence my mother’s sexuality, and all manner of wishy-washy systems that further obscured my search for the truth. Religion gleaned from text didn’t interest me. Values imbued in the public consciousness were too ethereal and out of reach. I wanted the certainty of spiritual truth and the solid physicality of a tool that could deliver. No intangible nonsense could convince me otherwise.

One morning, as I pouted in the basement of the Unitarian Universalist Church of the West, the youth director introduced to us a man with a dark ponytail and a suede vest.

“This is a Druid,” she said. “Druids base their beliefs on a respect for the natural world.”

Then she stepped to the edge of the room and took a seat. Whatever the Druid set to teaching us kids seemed utterly out of her hands. The man stood up front, looking at something off in the middle distance with a sad, yearning expression resting on his smooth cheeks, and his hands clasped behind his back. Underneath his vest, he wore a dark green shirt made out of a gauzy natural fiber the color of green forest leaves. He was a little paunchy in a way that I found nonthreatening. I tried Sunday mornings in Catholic mass after Saturday night sleepovers, and found I distrusted the men in white vestments and their tyrannical piety, their subdued techniques crafted to inspire fear the same way a hand slowly tightens its grip. Something about the Catholic theatricality made me more wary of the truth behind the system. Show me the real deal. The Druid wore the pants and sneakers of a regular guy.

“The natural world is under attack,” he began, still staring off into the distance. “Druidry connects us to the earth,

and we are sympathetic to her suffering.” His eyes refocused and landed on the cross-legged kids on the ground. We waited. “Let’s form a circle.”

We scooted out and formed a half ring around the Druid and he stooped for his canvas messenger bag. From the pocket, he extracted four stones and set each one down at the cardinal directions. He produced a small bundle of dried herbs and stood in the center of the compass.

“In Druidry, we acknowledge the four directions. The compass is a source of wisdom and creativity, and we celebrate the four points by giving thanks to all corners of the earth.” He lit the bundle. The youth director slid off her chair and quietly opened the back door, letting the sunshine in and tempting the younger kids around the circle with a partial view of the playground.

“We draw a circle in the air to begin.” The Druid drew a circle of smoke at the length of his outstretched arm. He extinguished the ember in a brass bowl on the floor and stuffed the bundle back in his bag, then returned to his attentive stance. “We begin by slowing our breath, deep breaths in and out to release the tension in our bodies.” He began to inhale audibly, exhale slowly, as if to teach us how to breathe. “Your whole body is relaxed. You feel safe, secure. You close your eyes and let the energy flow through you.” He closed his eyes, opened his arms, and let his head fall back in prayer. “Be a vessel,” he said. “Be a source of light, and relax as you connect yourself to Mother Earth.” We sat on lint and snack crumbs on the carpet, pretended not to hear the noise from passing cars outside, and tuned into the Druid’s unfamiliar prayer. Another deep breath. I watched his chest puff and deflate.

“Mother Earth, we stand ready to thank you for the wisdom you provide, the creativity you release, and the healing you foster.” The Druid went around the four cardinal points and said a similar prayer of thanks and promise to each of his stones. Some of my peers had their eyes closed too, following his meditation behind relaxed and trusting expressions. The ritual went on until he had addressed every direction and the unique gifts it provides. When he was through, he packed everything up in the reverse order it had appeared, as if this was part of the process itself. Some kids were still and silent like they had fallen asleep during the prayer. The youth director remained in her chair in the corner, letting us rest and sink into the peace the Druid created in the room. I relaxed a little. I might not have realized it with full articulation, but I began to admire this process he put on display more than the sleek attempts to convince me of something higher in the language of authority. I felt this was real, even in all its embarrassing sincerity. Bearing witness to the shameless process had drawn from me an odd feeling of trust. Here was an individual who committed to believing in a practice, to observing the power of the natural world and allowing for

some mysteries to remain mysterious. His tools were humble, and he transported them unguarded in his messenger bag, knocking around against each other from one makeshift prayer room to the next. No frills. No trickery. No trinkets.

Although it’s taken me another lifetime, I’ve learned to let go of the tools and trust the process of construction. Or at least I know this is what I’m supposed to learn. There is a tangible simplicity in work that emerges from one tool, two hands, a lump of clay or plot of earth, but it is not a means to the end of a spiritual blueprint. I can paddle a canoe without a destination. I can dig a hole for no reason. I can stir a meal and trust the process without the expectation of a grand reward. Why is it so much more difficult to do the same work from the inside? Maybe that’s the big contradiction—we anticipate one result from the process, yet are often delivered to another entirely.

My mother and I stood back from the porch and considered the work we had completed with a few broken pieces and a tube of superglue. We had the head glued back on by the afternoon, although you could tell our procedure would leave visible scars.

“He looks alright,” my mother said. “You can barely tell.”

A few days later, it happened again. This time, whoever had taken a bat to the Siddhartha came back to finish the job. They knocked off the head and smashed the face on the ground into irrecoverable pieces, something even tenuous faith and superglue couldn’t fix. But we knew where we stood in doubt and in faith and let the Buddha remain on the porch, headless, spiteful, disobeying his execution. I found shards of the Buddha in the grass for the next two summers. Eventually, we threw it away.

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Annie Raab writes fiction, art criticism, and creative nonfiction. Her work has appeared in the Ploughshares blog, *The Southampton Review*, *Sculpture*, *The Pitch*, the *Minnesota Review*, and more. She currently lives in Appalachia and is working on her MFA at Virginia Tech. She is at work on many things, including a graphic novel.



# The Forge of Vulcan

CAITLIN CACCIATORE

Tell me  
That you remember  
The world as it was.

Hand me some relic  
Of times gone by,  
If only so I can hold my breath  
While it goes to seed in clumsy hands  
That were built for a different place;  
Another town, another time.

Child, I bid you – remember.

Child, I beg of you – remember.

Child, I beseech you –

Hold on to the fading specter of days gone by.

Stack the days,  
Bind the years together  
In the book of your memory;

Remind the ones who come along  
Only after the fog has lifted  
That this was a different kind of land,  
In those times before time;

Tell your children and your children's children  
About this disappearing once-upon-a-time world;  
The one we watched fold its fragile wings  
As it turned to ash.

Tell the world  
You once watched it burn

Tell them all

We let it –

Tell them

We set that fire.

Caitlin Cacciatore is a queer writer and poet who lives on the outskirts of New York City. She believes poetry has the power to create change and brighten lives, and wishes for her work to be an agent of forward motion. She has been published in *Willawaw Literary Journal* and the *Roadrunner Review*.

olgaosa

# Good Night, Marcus

CAITLIN CACCIATORE

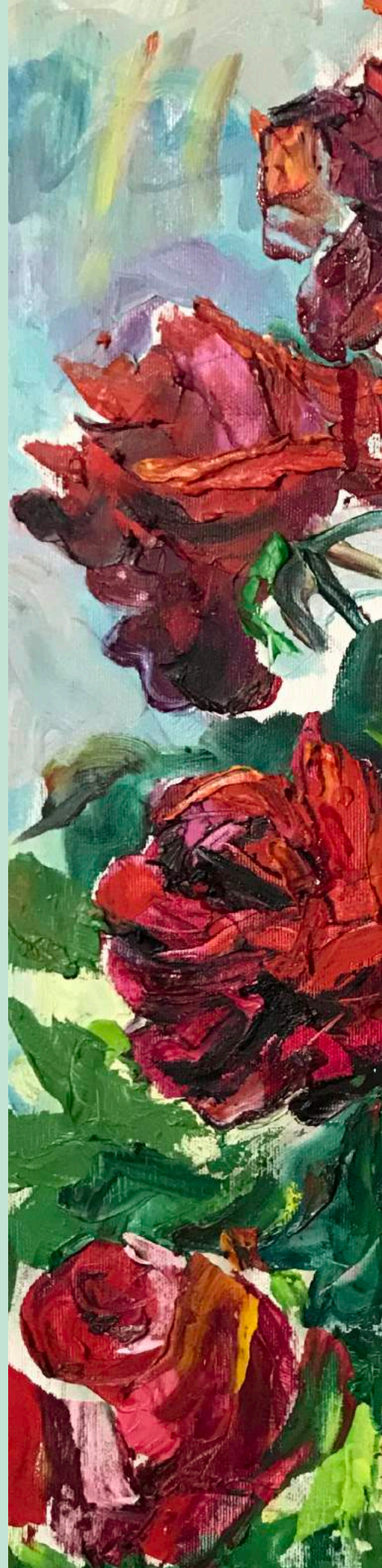
Mr. Cogito is long dead  
by the time the first of great plagues of the 21st century  
come shuffling up the door,  
smearing excrement on the welcome rug,  
lifting the knocker before thinking better of it,  
and barge in.

He no longer laments the pettiness of dreams,  
though they have all gone to dust;  
nor does he address Roman Emperors by name  
or leaf through yesterday's newspaper,  
contemplating the geography  
and geometry of distant wars  
in far-flung forests.

"well, Marcus,  
Better hang up your peace;"  
It'll sit in the gallows beside beauty and friendship,  
The Forms of which were doubtless buried  
With Plato, their stake gladly driven  
Into the ashen ground  
By a smiling Aristotle,  
Who knew history too well  
To allow mathematics to stand in the way  
Of good old-fashioned philosophy.

There is no time to triangulate  
The exact place of death,  
No place for geometry  
When there's geography to fight over,  
No need to die  
When it's easier to send someone in your place,  
Easier, yes, to live with  
The guilt and  
The consequences.

And the vows we took  
In that shining peace  
Are worth too little  
To trade or to tally.





olgaosa





## Take No Solace

CAITLIN CACCIATORE

Do you recall that night in June, when the summer was  
young and so were you?

Let the memory take you back to the edge of the forest  
where you lifted your voice  
In praise of a God who had since been forsaken by the  
world.

And if ever you feel compelled to come back there,  
To the edge of the estuary where the salmon come to  
spawn,  
To that great precipice where sea meets sky,  
To the border of the field where we have long since ceased  
to bury our dead –  
You will find her there,  
Waiting for you in a shroud of linen and lace,  
Calling your name in dulcet tones,  
Listen;

There, you will learn the name of the world when it was  
young,  
When the stars themselves shone brighter  
And the constellations we hold so dear had yet drift into  
formation,  
When the firmament held all the glory and wonder  
Of a place and a time which has long since gone to  
ground;  
Listen as the last of the Gods  
Burdens you with an untimely truth –

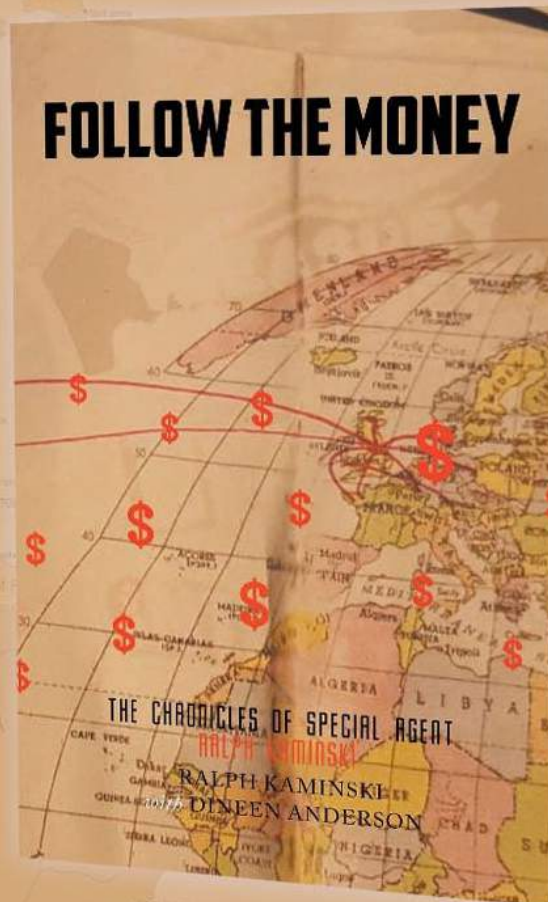
Do not take the blade she offers you;  
Do not slice into her like a waterfowl cuts through water;  
Do not look down at blood-stained hands glistening in  
moonlight;  
Do not dig a shallow grave in the light of dawn –  
And when the deed is done,  
Take no solace.

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RALPH KAMINSKI

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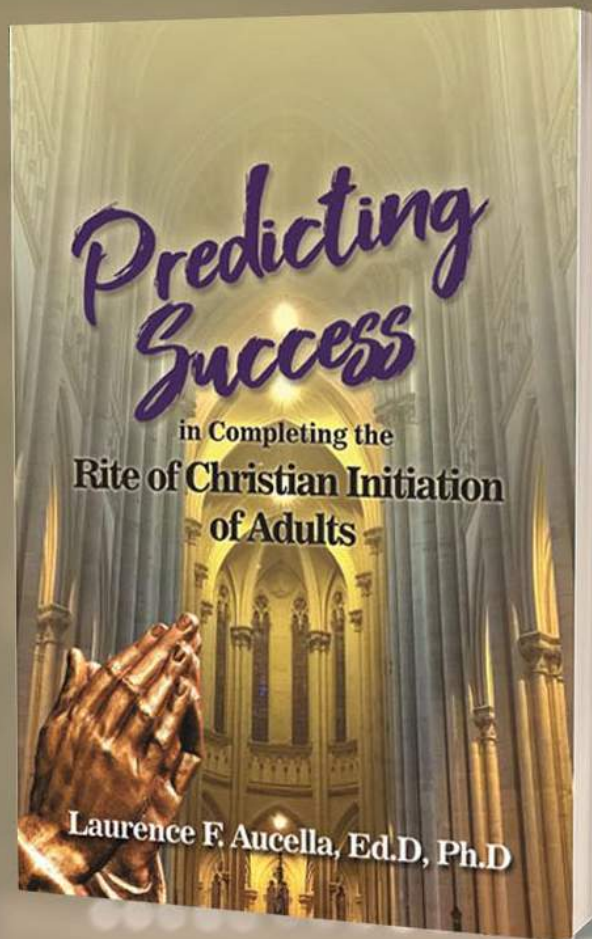
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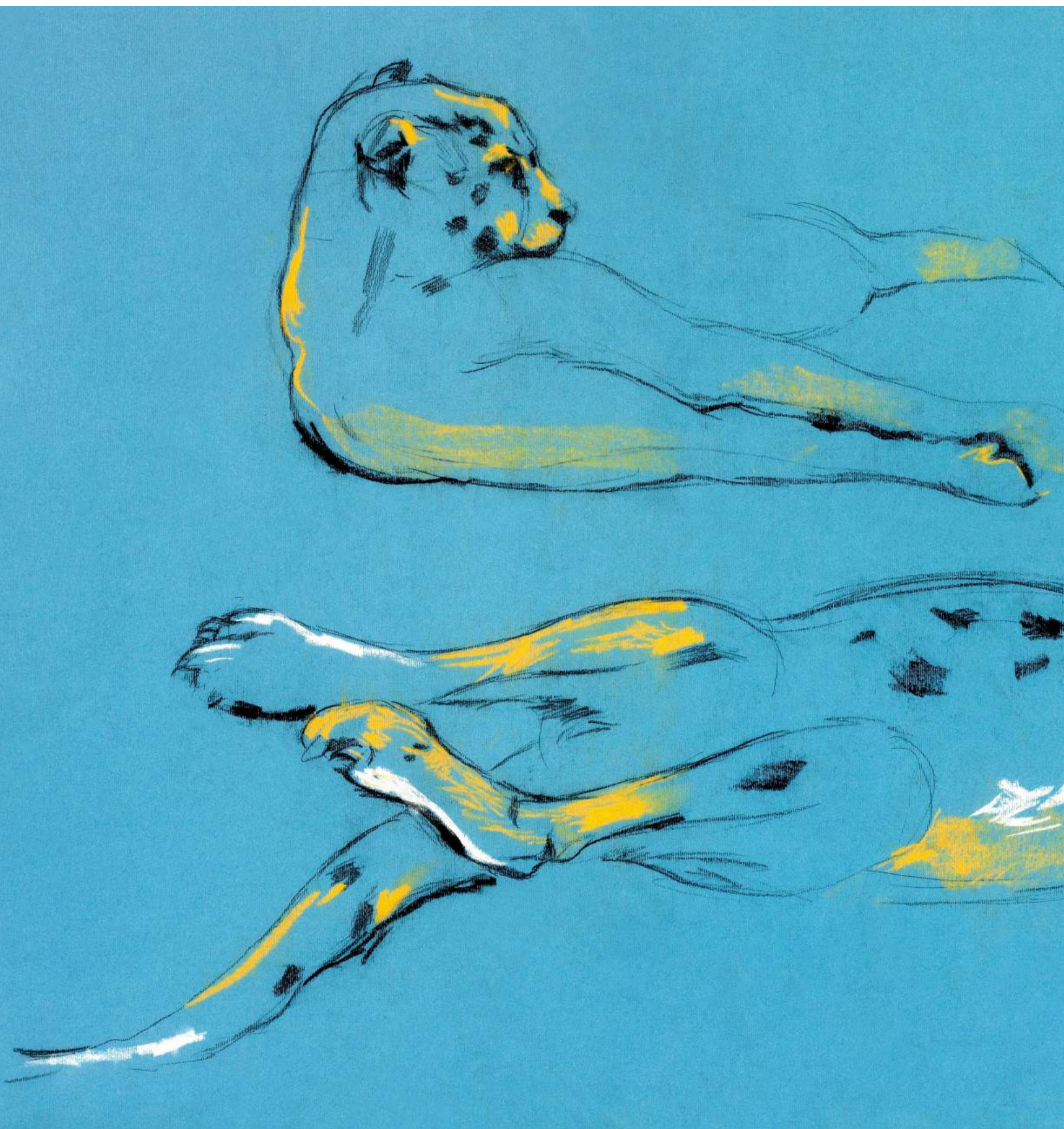
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# Sacrifice at White Lake

SHAWN KOBB

Helicopters dance overhead, turkey vultures waiting for their meal to drop dead. Every day they appeared, and every day they went home disappointed. Jeb refused to give in, and the mountain refused to kill him. Jeb gave them a double middle finger salute and hoped the news feed was live.

He pulled his knit hat down tighter around his few remaining tufts of hair and stepped back inside his cabin. It was mid-May, but this high up on the mountain spring took its time to arrive and just as quickly surrendered to a brief summer of mosquitoes and biting flies. Jeb preferred the harsh snowy winter with its peace and isolation.

The sounds of the helicopter blades grew faint as they gave up the day's hunt and returned to the city. They'd be back tomorrow and he would still be here. Or he wouldn't. They would finally have their damned story, but Jeb didn't expect he'd care much at that point.

The ground beneath him woke gradually, a slow steady rumble that grew stronger and stronger with every breath. The dishes clattered about in the sink. Jeb put a hand against the wall and waited for the quake to pass, as it did within a few seconds. Nothing but a small rumble this time, but they occurred more and more regularly.

Jeb was angry. He had given most of his life to the mountain. This year he celebrated—as much as he did that sort of thing—his 83rd birthday, and he had spent 57 of those years living in his cabin on the side of the mountain, window overlooking the turquoise waters of White Lake. He had served the mountain faithfully, shed blood for her, the best years of his life, and this was how she repaid him?

"Ungrateful bitch." He didn't care if she heard.

He opened the cabinet and pulled out four cans of pink salmon and scattered them about the little counter top. Jeb grabbed the can opener from the drawer and started cranking them open. The swollen knuckles of his fingers made the task difficult, but the warming of the weather helped. Sam and Flower arrived first, jumping through the window, mirror images of each other. Lady came soon after. The others would come soon enough.

There had been dozens of cats over the years and Jeb had named them all. He put thought into it too. Naming was a privilege, something that mattered at a level that was hard for Jeb to explain. He could have had dozens of Tigers and Nippers, but what was the point in that? Jeb wasn't into any sort of new age hippie nonsense like the name chose the cat. No, Jeb picked out the names, but at the same time he sensed in his gut that he selected the right name for the right cat. Couldn't explain why. Just did.

Boyan Dimitrov

He emptied the first can into a bowl on the floor and the twins ran to it and started eating loudly. This lasted as long as it took for Ajax to jump to the floor and muscle his way in, asserting his authority. Sam and Flower gave way and waited for the next bowl to be filled.

By the time Jeb filled the fourth bowl all the cats were present except for the little black and white he called Peema, and Lily, his closest companion.

Jeb sat at the table and ate his own supper, leftover spaghetti from yesterday. He ate all the meatballs yesterday and the meal disappointed. He washed dinner down with a glass of long-life milk that he bought in town, 25 miles down slope. The cats ate as he spun spaghetti onto his fork.

It wasn't until after everyone had finished supper that Lily came strolling in, leaping through the open window with unnatural grace. She stopped near the remaining bits of canned salmon, sniffed, and continued on to Jeb, rubbing her angular chin against his shin. He reached down and scooped her up with one hand.

"How's my Lily doing this evening?" Her eyes closed to narrow crystal blue slits, and she began a deep, low hum. "You're late to supper."

Jeb walked to his rocker and sat down, Lily draped over his bony forearm. The chair faced the only window in his little cabin and the peak of the mountain stared down on him. The sun settled low and the reddening sky matched the mood of the towering peak. Another shudder rolled under foot, but it could have been his imagination.

#

Jebediah Howell had been caretaker of White Lake Lodge for 57 years. He had served the mountain for more than fifty of those years. It took Jeb a few years to understand this. The mountain was a queen; more than that—a goddess. The master of the wilderness, and a hungry goddess that demanded homage. She tamed them, not the other way around.

He had never been a happy man. That wasn't to say he wasn't content or satisfied with his lot, but he didn't laugh or jabber on. What was the point? He was a worker. He did his job in the war and came home with medals he didn't care about. For a brief stint he worked as a mechanic in his uncle's garage until a fateful camping trip brought him to the mountain. Sleeping in his ragged, makeshift tent Jeb heard singing coming from the very Earth beneath his feet. He realized he would never leave the mountain again.

He found a job with the lodge handling basic maintenance and odd chores. Over the years his responsibilities grew until he was as much a part of the lodge as the nearby lake, the mountain trails, and the scenic vista above. Jeb was a fixture at the lodge, rarely leaving except to buy supplies.

Visitors came from the city to the lodge for long summer weekends. Rich folk, as Jeb thought of them, with their spoiled children and their chrome-plated cars. He never cared about the people. He cared for the lodge, the wilderness, and most of all, the mountain.

Hundreds of people came to the lodge every summer. A few miles away a Boy Scout camp sat on the edge of the lake and that also brought dozens of boys every year. Throw in the occasional day tripper to the lake and more than enough traffic existed to quench the mountain's thirst for blood.

Terrible accidents. Tragedies. Misfortune. People had all sorts of words for death, but it was the mountain taking what she wanted, what she demanded. Jeb would swear to that if anyone had ever thought to ask him. The way he reckoned, it wasn't any different than a feudal lord taking a pig from a serf in exchange for protection. The mountain, she went about it differently. She was a jealous, proud creature. She required proper offerings. City folk on a lake drinking beers always meant the occasional drowning. An eleven-year-old out alone trying to earn his wilderness survival merit badge sometimes led to hypothermia.

And, as long as the mountain received her sacrifice, the rest of them could live in peace. Jeb understood this. He couldn't believe how blind everyone else was to this fact.

The rare tremor that shook the guests would scare them at first, but eventually lead to laughter when no real damage came of it. The tourists, the Boy Scouts, even the scientists who studied the mountain were ignorant of the malevolent, hungry goddess that loomed over them.

Jeb understood the rules of life on the mountain. It was several years into his life at the lodge before a summer passed without an accident. He could tell the mountain grew impatient. The ground would shake, but only Jeb felt it. The sky would burn an angry red, and the tourists took photographs. A hundred fish would wash up dead along the shores of White Lake, cooked by thermal vents buried deep below.

It was surprisingly easy to nudge fate a certain direction. Hide a trail marker or leave a light turned off. A loose railing near the stairs leading to the boat dock or a patch of untreated black ice in the winter. Accidents happened. There might be occasional grumbling about shoddy maintenance thrown Jeb's way, but he was too much of an institution for outright accusation.

Years passed and the mountain was appeased. Jeb lived a quiet life. He did not associate with the rest of the staff, content to live alone with the cats that began to show up at his cabin.

Honestly, Jeb couldn't even remember all the cats anymore. Each was special in its own way, in its own time, but he wasn't so sentimental as to pretend it was more than that. Lily was different though. That was obvious from the moment he found her basking in the afternoon one day on his little porch.

Lily and Jeb spent as much time apart as they did together. He didn't know what she did all day while he toiled around the lodge and he didn't care. Jeb allowed her privacy. She didn't constantly hound him for attention as some cats were inclined to do. It was an easy relationship and it suited Jeb fine.

Life was good for many years, too long for any good thing to last. The economy fell apart. Jeb didn't understand why and he didn't really care. He didn't need a retirement plan. Everything he needed was in his cabin, and, well if they tried to fire him and kick him out, he'd go down fighting. He would either stay put or be buried here. Jeb had told people that for years.

"I've lived my entire life on this mountain and I mean to die on it." Maybe they thought he was being dramatic or even difficult. Jeb didn't much care what they thought.

Turned out a bad economy did matter to other people. It mattered to the tourists who stayed at the lodge. The people who paid

for the rooms that paid for the utilities and the food and the staff wages. A downward spiral ran out of control. As fewer tourists came, the lodge cut staff. With fewer staff, the service went downhill and tourists complained.

Jeb didn't care about the status of the books. The way he saw it, the owners of the lodge had made more than their share of money over the years. The mountain she didn't want to hear about economic recession. The mountain wanted her regular sacrifices and those couldn't happen if there weren't enough folks around to drown in the lake or wander off trail and freeze to death.

Tremors had always been a part of life on the mountain, but over the last year they grew frequent and stronger. It wasn't only people like Jeb who lived on the mountain that were noticing; the outside world was taking note. Scientists dressed in cargo pants were showing up to poke at the mountain and take notes on their laptops. Journalists arrived to interview the locals about their fears of an eruption.

That's what the scientists said was coming: Eruption. The big one. The police moved people from their homes. They put up yellow tape and closed other camps and lodges. Dire warnings of lava and deadly gas became regular conversation on the local news.

Jeb didn't need to be convinced. He understood what was coming. The others could chalk up the signs to science and geothermal shifting miles beneath the surface, but he lived here. He was part of the land, and it was all much simpler than everyone thought: The mountain needed respect. She preened in her beauty and expected adulation. Instead of praise and awe, she received candy bar wrappers and selfies.

Jeb could stop what was coming. She gave him the choice. This knowledge ached deep in his bones. The mountain was harsh and unforgiving, but she was not unreasonable. The value of the sacrifice was not determined by its size or by its public profile. What made a sacrifice real, a true gift, was the pain and longing left behind.

Jeb wasn't crazy. He didn't hear voices. The mountain didn't communicate with him through a burning bush or whispered words carried on the breeze, but that didn't mean he couldn't understand what she wanted.

The mountain needed sacrifice. She would accept what Jeb could offer. Not himself. He was a worn-out old man who had lived and endured enough for any one person. He would gladly die when his time was up. That wasn't any proper sacrifice. No one would mourn Jeb's passing. Few would even know outside of a small obituary in local newspaper.

He held Lily tighter; her purr a comfort deep inside his chest. Her eyes were completely closed now, but she didn't sleep. She was content, at peace in his arms. Jeb loved her more than anything in this world, and she was the one thing he was unwilling to let go. She believed in him and trusted him. He would not betray that trust. The mountain would do what it had to do, and he would stay by her side until the end.

#

It was a beautiful spring day. Sun warmed the side of the mountain, but it was not yet hot. The trees were green with the buds of tiny leaves, and larks sang to each other.

The last few days the tremors had become almost constant. The

end was coming and the helicopters circled at a safe distance fighting for the perfect shot. They spent as much time over the lodge as possible due to Jeb's recent celebrity. The police agreed they could not force him to leave. One eccentric with a death wish would be written off so they could focus their efforts on the greatest number possible.

Jeb stood on the front porch and looked up toward the peak. He held his blue enameled mug of coffee when the face of the mountain start to slide, a bandage ripped away to reveal the horror underneath. A few seconds later the sounds of stone grinding against stone reached him.

*This is what the Earth sounded like during creation.*

He sat his cup down, and Lily walked up the front steps to him, unconcerned about the impending apocalypse.

He sat in a weathered chair and the cat jumped to his lap and began purring. His old gray eyes met her liquid blue ones. He saw gratitude, warmth, and understanding.

"Don't you worry, Lily. I ain't about to give you up."

She closed her eyes and curled up on his lap. The wave of destruction raced down the mountain toward the lodge, the lake, and the world below. Perhaps sensing his final denial, the mountain put forth all her effort in a terrible display of anger.

A black cloud of super heated gas and chunks of molten rock exploded from near the top of the mountain and quickly overtook the approaching avalanche.

Jeb closed his eyes and embraced the warmth of Lily on his lap, her purr a gentle buzz in his heart.

---

Shawn Kobb is an American diplomat by day and writer by night (and sometimes the other way around). He has lived, worked, and traveled in more than 40 countries and uses this experience to fuel his writing. He currently lives in Alexandria, Virginia, but will move to Budapest, Hungary later in 2020.



Annie Spratt

# What Does It Sound?

TANIA MITRA

I wonder what sound a tree  
Makes when it gets uprooted.

Does it cry in shrill shrieks of  
Despair as it feels itself ripped  
Away from earth like callous  
Hands dipping into souls and  
Turning them black?

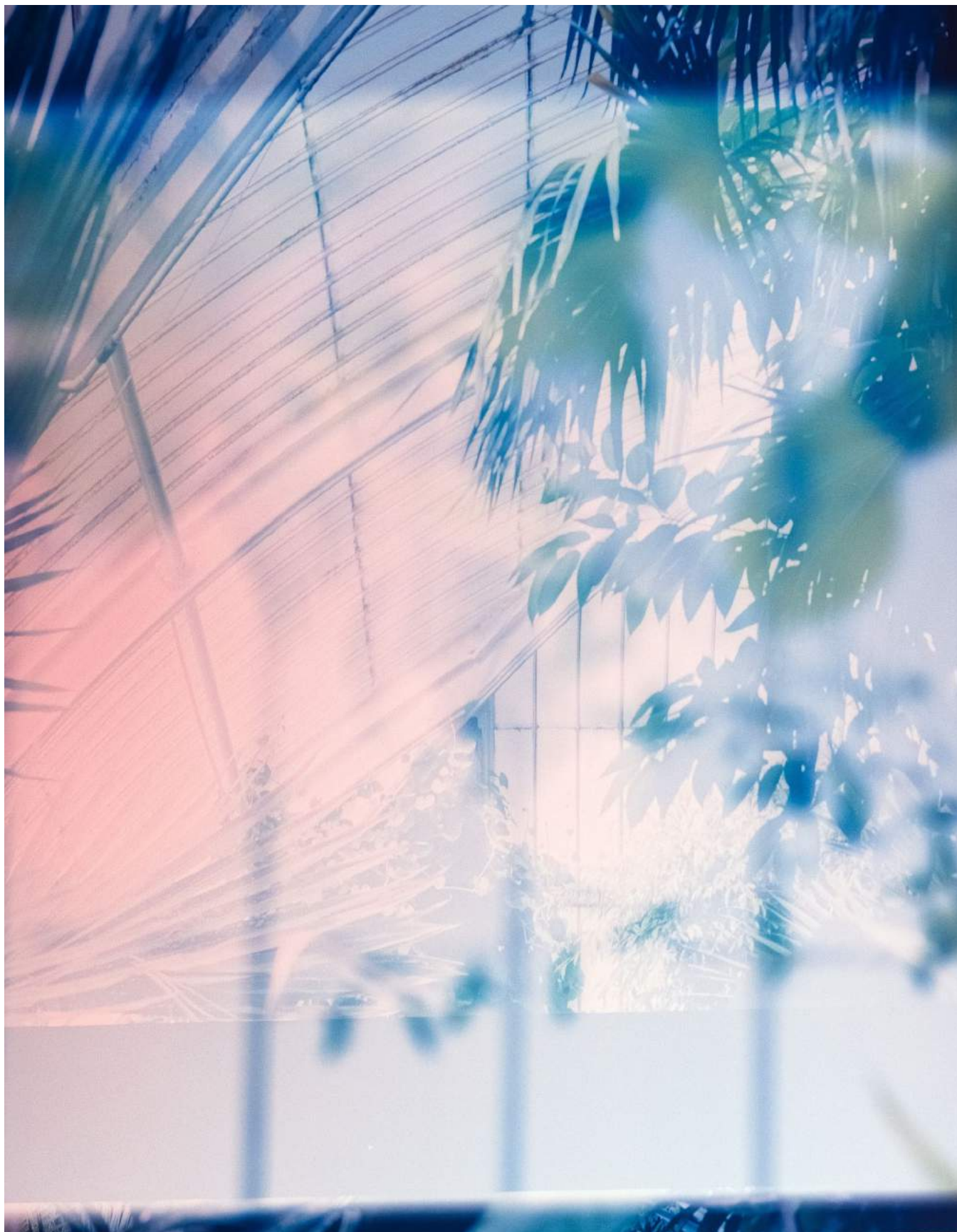
Does it whimper a silent tune,  
Singing its own funeral march  
Like dead men dressed in chimney  
Smoke heading home from factories  
Where they burn their lungs and lives?

Does it sound a resounding rage  
As it furiously sways in the wind,  
Grasping for the dust that slowly  
Chips away like the memories of a  
Deer with a tigers' teeth sinking into its  
Neck?

Does it tremble with curious  
Uncertainties swirling in and out of  
Hazy incoherence, like the woes  
And resentments of a drunken man  
Too submerged to swim?

I wonder what sound a tree  
Makes when it gets uprooted;  
I wonder if it makes a sound at all for  
If there's no one to hear it, does a tree  
Falling down still make a sound?

Tania Mitra is from India and she writes poetry because it's the simplest way for her to reflect. She enjoys writing about home, the subtleties of the bonds we share, and key moments of my life.



Annie Spratt

# Habits

TANIA MITRA

5:16 am

I take the first train home  
First thing in the morning.

A stranger sits next to me,  
Strange, hands intertwined  
Like the earphones on my lap,  
Like the taste of leftover beer  
And tongue from the hour before.

An old man gets on at the next  
Station; crisp, clean, he is on  
His way to work. Daily monotony  
Doesn't get old.

Next to him, a twenty-something-year  
Old lies somewhere between sleep and  
Drunken consciousness. Strange,

They both revel in habit.

Across us, an empty seat still  
Holds the impressions of  
Its last occupant. I smile a little.

"What is it?" My newfound companion asks.

I shift his gaze to the imprints  
And muse, "You ever wonder how  
You're connected to the lives of  
People you don't even know?"

After a moment of idle thought, he tells  
Me that it was a much too intense idea  
For a much too early morning.

I laugh at his honest rumination and  
Lean in for a kiss.

Sean Sinclair

## Footsteps

TANIA MITRA

(A ghazal about Osaka, the first city I lived alone in, and found my way)

You smell of contentment and Asahi beer,  
How lovely you are.

In your narrow lanes, I know not fear,  
How lovely you are.

Sometimes I get lost in your blue skies  
And see a world between there and here,  
How lovely you are.

I've walked baby steps in adult shoes  
And reached quite far despite being so near  
How lovely you are.

Your colors remind me of a love  
Mismatched, belonging, a little queer  
How lovely you are.

Your midnight silence and midday tourists  
Are all memories, not mere souvenirs,  
How lovely you are.

I built a home, you and my heart,  
Myself I found, it is quite clear  
How lovely you are.

Distance will part us in time again  
But time will remember this reverse,  
How lovely you are.



Steve Johnson

# A Pill Bug Remembers

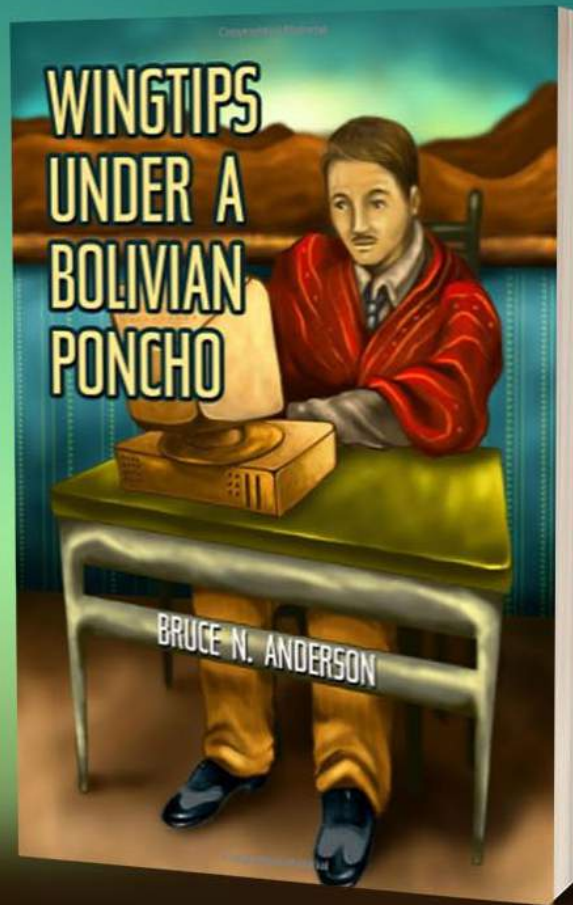
GREG BEATTY

Unlike your garden variety bugs,  
bombardier beetles pack heat, safely,  
tucking hydroquinone in one pouch,  
hydrogen peroxide in the other.  
When mix and spark with catalysts,  
these dull bugs fire boiling poison  
at their enemies. Each chemical's safe  
so long as it is isolated, but together...  
tiny insect napalm flames in Eden,  
which is where, incidentally,  
man and woman first combined,  
sparked by a catalyst, to burn  
and extrude corrosive passion.  
Individually inert, when mixed  
they fire sin at all and sundry,  
like my parents when a child  
of theirs walks by  
the bedroom.

Greg Beatty writes poetry, short stories, children's books, and a range of nonfiction. He's published hundreds of works—everything from poems about stars to essays on cooking disasters. When he's not writing, he walks with his dog, dabbles in the martial arts, plays with his grandchildren, and teaches college. For more information on Greg's writing, visit <https://beattytales.com/>

BRUCE N. ANDERSON

# WINGTIPS UNDER A BOLIVIAN PONCHO

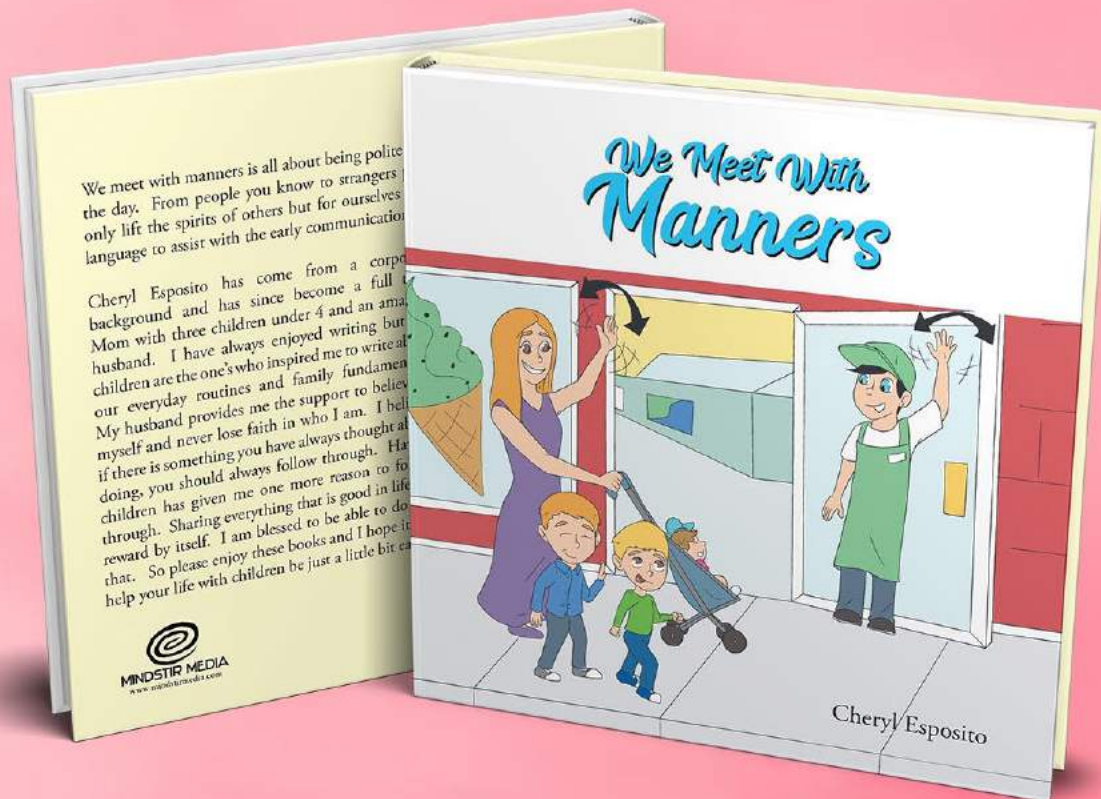


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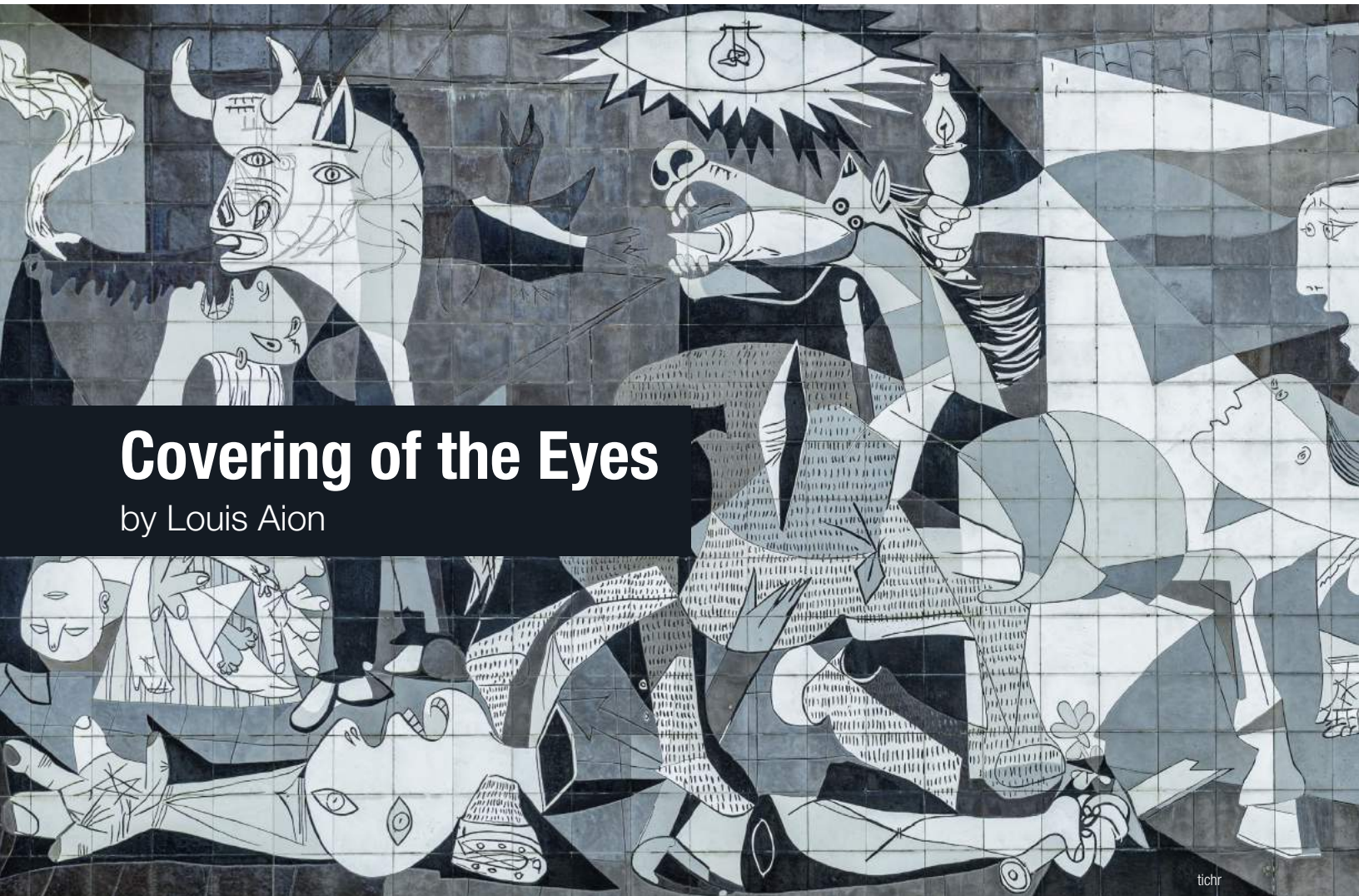
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# Covering of the Eyes

by Louis Aion

**From: Michael**

**To: Samantha**

**Subject: Re: Bad news about Aunt P :(**

**Date: Monday, April 27, 2020, 09:04:11 PM UTC-4**

Dear Sammie,

so sad to hear about Aunt Patty's passing. "Gone way too soon," is what I first thought upon hearing the news; truth is, she must have been almost 80. Remember how often she spoke about the Fifties? Anyway, we should get in touch with a few of the other kids from the base, organize some kind of tribute. Aunt P. must have raised hundreds of kids in Jacksonville.

Bro. Ben died yesterday too. You might remember him: old guy from Lodge, big golf buff. He was a lovely man, graced with a quick wit. Ghastly times we live in.

What about dear old me, you ask. I was on wardrobe duty today, my favorite. The household staff keeps everything in order and all of His suits have "That Look," anyway. Some days He'll get fastidious about a pin or a tie but that's it.

I slipped into the residence sometime before 9. He was watching TV in his boxers and a white long-sleeved shirt. True to stereotype, crumpled wrappings from two sausage McMuffins were lying on the floor. He

barely looked at me while I showed him the clothes I had picked. (I count that as a win! Gentlemanship is a game of mistakes after all ;) For the press conference he insisted on wearing the Flag's colors – with a solid red tie of course. He sounded much warmer tonight, don't you think?

Love,

M.

**From: Michael**

**To: Samantha**

**Subject: Re: Re: Re: Bad news about Aunt P :(**

**Date: Wednesday, April 29, 2020, 09:38:23 PM UTC-4**

Yes! That sounds like a wonderful idea. Aunt P. would have loved it! Let's find another couple of people to split the cost with and we're good to go. I'll text Justin tonight, see what he and Christina think. Here at the White House the foot traffic is still brisk. Many visitors will not wear masks either. It's all for show of course: they want to make a statement and curry favor with the local denizens. It's all starting to feel a bit surreal though. Thick skin aside, how are these people's bubbles still whole?

BTW, I've read your Gov. is under a lot of pressure for the golf



Louis Aion is an avid reader and sometimes writer. He especially enjoys thinking about the influence of social and institutional changes on individual lives. Louis has lived in several countries and speaks three languages fluently.

courses issue. He's already starting to deflect responsibilities: this Board here, that advisor there. I'm sure he'll fold. Why people call it a leader is beyond me. He's always stalling to see what side will win. Say what you will about the President, but at least He speaks His mind. As it happens, he was despondent today, restless. Rough day. I'm craving sleep.

Talk soon,

M.

THE WHITE HOUSE  
WASHINGTON

May 4, 2020

MEMORANDUM TO ALL WHITE HOUSE STAFF

FROM: [Redacted]

SUBJECT: Restrictions on Communications with the Media and the Public

[...]

These are extraordinary times. We face extraordinary challenges, both

in the public health arena and in the international relations arena.

[...]

The President has made the decision that, as a matter of basic policy, other White House staff members will not conduct briefings or make public press appearances, nor speak on background with members of the press.

Furthermore, White House staff members will use utmost care to maintain the confidentiality of all information and materials relating to the current Coronavirus crisis. This expectation of confidentiality extends to personal as well official communications, in writing as well as all other forms of communication no matter how informal they may appear.

MAY 6 2020

**Sammie**  
08:11

**I can't breathe**  
08:11

**And I think I have a fever**  
08:12

**Please don't freak out**  
08:12

**But I think I got the virus**  
08:12

**Please don't tell mom yet, she'll freak out**  
08:13

**OMG**  
08:13

**I'll try to get a swab today**  
08:13

**Had a cough for two days now but it was v light**  
08:13

**I'll be fine**  
08:14

**Fun times ahead tho, u know he hates sick ppl :(**  
08:14

**Take good care of yourself! And call me!**  
08:14

**Yeah talk soon**  
08:15

**Love u**  
08:15

# LIVING A READY-MADE WAY

Bradford Middleton

I've survived this life doing it the ready-  
Made way. Since i was young i've always  
Had an aversion to anything like DIY-ing,  
Hell i could never be a Robinson Jeffers,  
As the days at school taught me nothing  
But to hate and loathe those who excelled  
At a class we had called CDT, craft design  
And technology, which essentially meant  
We did stuff with woodwork.

Mr Innes ruled his workshop with an  
Iron fist, one that meant those like me,  
Who saw no point in ever wanting to learn  
Anything in this pointless class, were not  
To be tolerated and must be crushed.

I already knew i'd never need these skills,  
Even all the way back then aged 11 or 12,  
And i'd go in and fool around.

One day someone did something  
I can't really remember now but it must have  
Been bad because he insisted we all go in  
For some after-school detention.

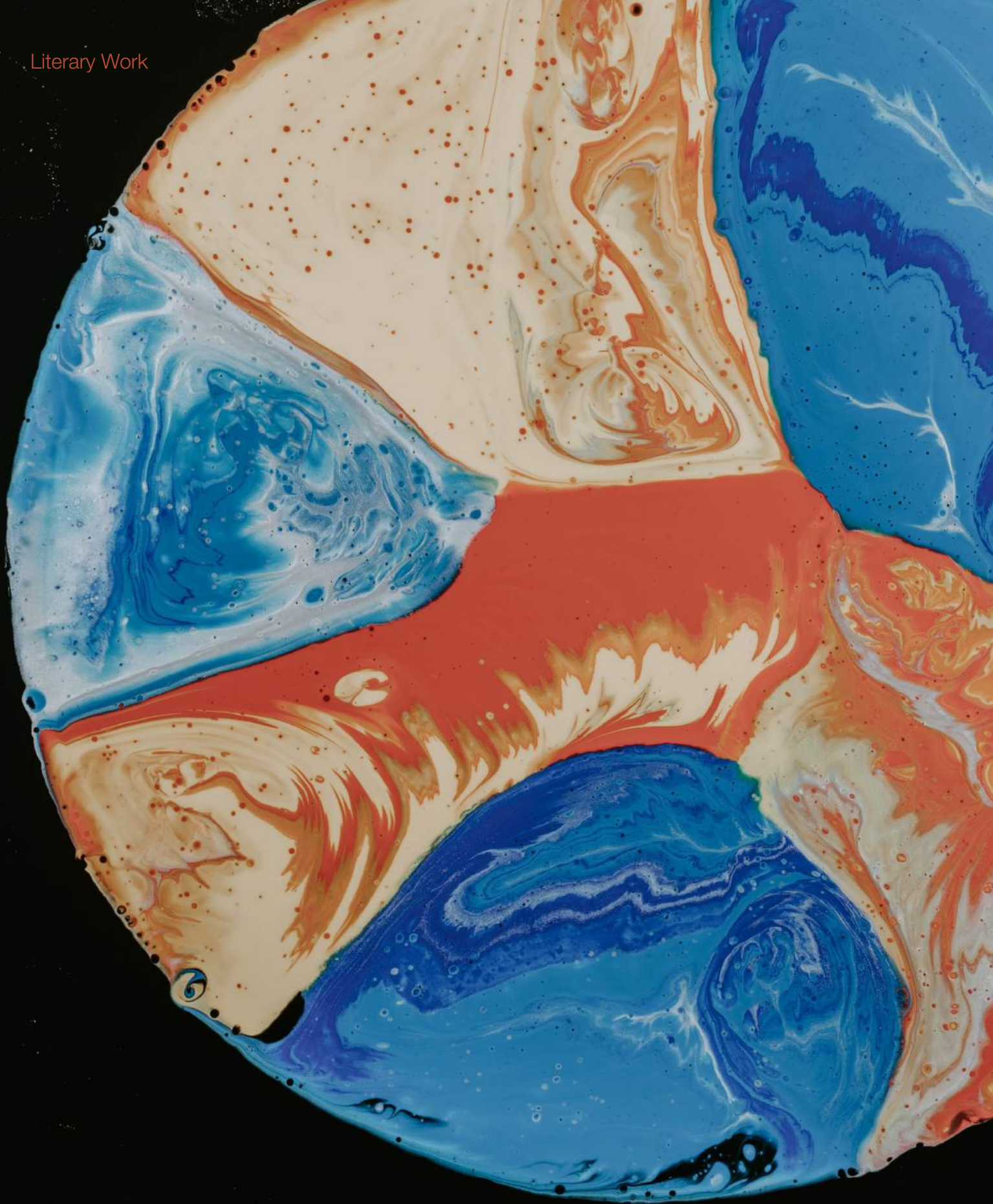
It was my first time being cast as a bad  
Boy and when i showed up, already angry  
At having to be there, the door to the workshop  
Was locked shut. I pounded loudly and no one  
Came and for some bizarre pre-teen meltdown  
Kinda reasoning i kicked in his door.

I still remember the look on his face, one  
Of almost pure elation as at last he'd got  
Me exactly where he wanted me; the baddest  
Of the bad boys.

He wanted me out, out of his  
Class and expelled from school, but I  
Somehow clung on and was told simply to  
Not go to that class any more and instead  
Of kicking a ball all alone against a wall i  
Made my way to the library and began this  
Life-long love affair with the word and  
Still to this day i still ain't ever needed any  
Of the skills i should have learnt in those  
Rotten damn classes...

Bradford Middleton lives in Brighton on the UK's south-coast. His poetry is all over the internet and in some highly respected journals as well as some punk zines. He's had three books of poetry published which have now all long sold-out but he's recently finished the latest draft of his second novel. Want to be his Facebook friend then find him [@bradfordmiddleton1](#).







## THE END OF THE WORLD BLUES

Bradford Middleton

Virus is the word, the thing that strikes terror  
into any media-washed small minded fools,  
And a virus has hold of  
This street  
This town  
This country  
This fucking planet  
And some are sure to make a lot of money  
from this if any survive  
But some will lose everything but me, hell  
I'm just happy to get the time to sit back here  
and write this  
The end of the world blues  
Knowing that somehow even if we do survive  
something is bound  
To have shifted and maybe  
This street  
This town  
This country  
This whole glorious fucking planet  
May end up somehow better.

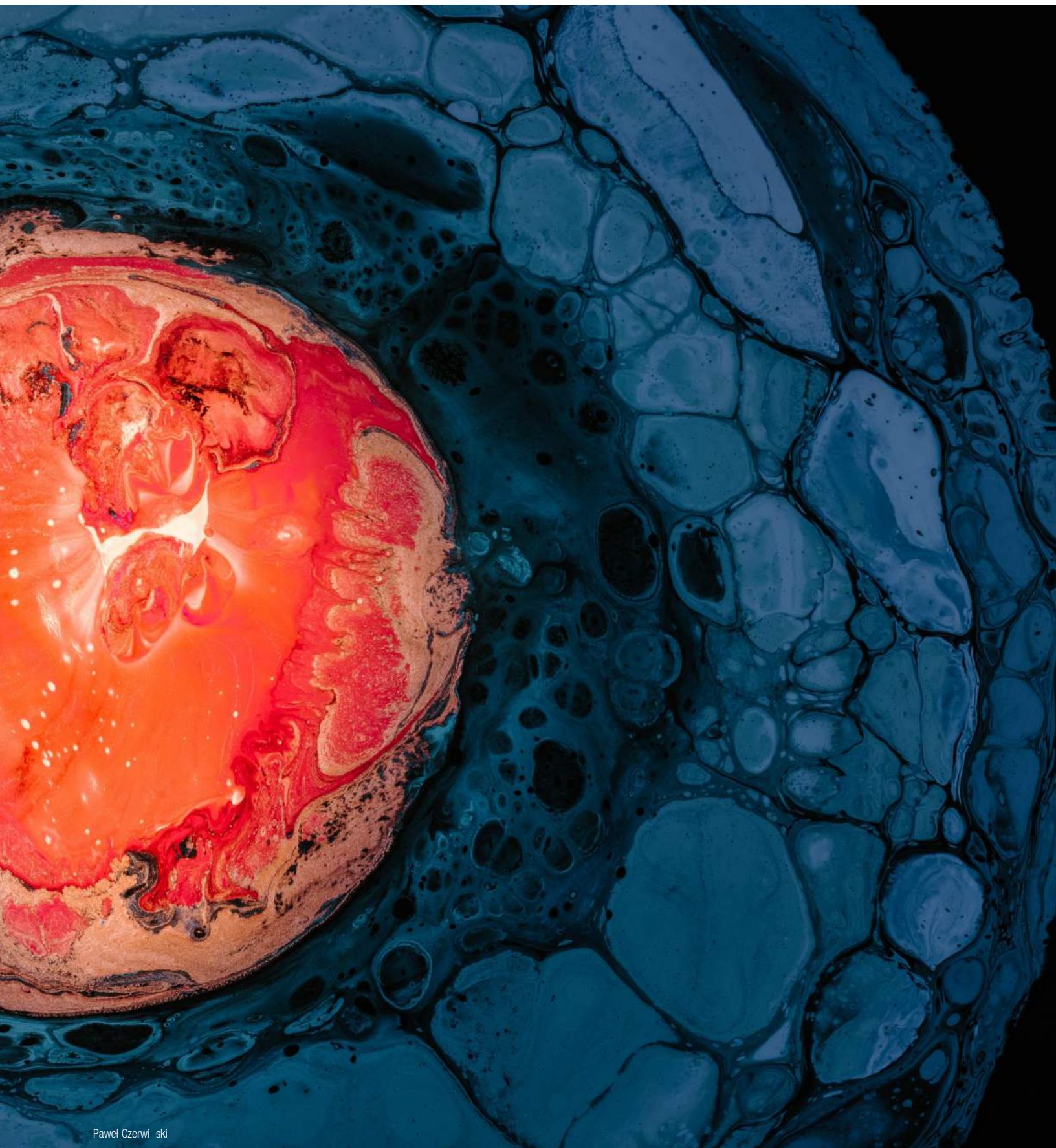
# REMEMBER THIS WHEN IT'S ALL OVER (i doubt they will)

Bradford Middleton

Even in these times of lock-down and the death of the Consumerist dream i still have to go to work because Hell, people will always need to buy their god-damn Food from someone almost always poorer than they Are. In times like these they'll tell you 'oh you guys Are all such heroes!' but what they really mean is 'thanks for risking your life just so i can buy a pint Of milk and a loaf of bread' and every day i'll return Home with dirt under my nails. Dirt and grime that Says, yes, i've done a hard days work, i've been a hero Just by going in for nine measly quid an hour because To those in charge that's all any of our lives are worth.

But when this whole fiasco is over will those who return To their easy office job still remember the fact we put Our lives on the line just so they could carry on living Or will they simply return to sipping their take-out Flat white and nibbling their croissant whilst bickering About how long it took to buy their lunch that day and How they're sure to feel better about it after posting Something bitchy on social media certain of their own Superiority because they've just come back from a nice Paid vacation during which they drove daily to the same Field or park and exercised just like they were told and Still supported the economy by popping to the shop at Least once a day for all those essential purchases.





Paweł Czerwiński



"Muse of Defiance" by Dylan Briones.  
Website: <https://dylbriones.carrrd.co/>

# WHAT KEEPS US TOGETHER

Shannon Titus

Sadie, she said. Her eyes were a yard from mine, wide and unblinking across the café table. Her neck was straining forwards, as if trying to leave her shoulders to inhabit mine. I relaxed into my chair and looked up at the sky. Endless blue. It looked like the Ionian Sea had turned upside down and was hovering above me.

Sadie, look at me. I obeyed. My mother had this kind of effect on me. I just don't get it. How could you let this happen? A soft wind blew from behind and I let it take my soft, brown hair up and away. *How could I let this happen?* The question hung there delicately.

My mother was a masterful puppeteer—tying invisible to strings to every person and thing in her life, and then jostling herself about until she got everything around her exactly as she wanted it. Orderly. Compliant. High-achieving. Having the excitement of chaos, but not the unpredictability of it.

I didn't hate her for it. She had used her powers to create a beautiful life for me, for my sister, my dad, her friends, for those less fortunate. She was an altruistic puppeteer.

But I was not. I was a puppet.

— — —  
The first time I laid eyes on Rowan, he was stirring rum and coke together with the end of his Rayban sunglasses. He licked his sunglasses after pulling them out of his self-made cocktail, and then placed them back on his head, laughing with his eyes closed. A few pieces of his curly, black hair fell against his forehead. He looked at me, smiled devilishly, and handed me the cup.

There was nothing remarkable about our meeting that night. We danced amongst strangers, and I stayed close to the one person whose name I knew—Isla. I smiled incessantly not because I was having fun, but because I was amused at my being there at all. I hated techno music. I hated crowds. I hated touching strangers who I had never spoken to. And yet there I was, engulfed in a sea of pulsing bodies and flashing lights. When I eventually left the tent to get some air, Rowan followed me out.

I looked up at the night sky, and Rowan looked at me. He stood an inch too close and smelled like rum and cigarettes. We had a conversation like two hundred others—

name, job, hobbies, family. When I eventually turned to leave I felt his hand wrap lightly around my upper arm, and his fingers slid down to my wrist as I moved away from him. That's when I first felt something. Skin. I ached for it.

I thought of Rowan's hand on my skin as I walked back to my apartment, and as I rubbed lotion onto my freshly washed face. Was it chemistry? Had it been that long since I'd been touched?

Rowan sent me a text message the next day. Hey, he wrote. Nothing more. I had not responded to a "hey" text message since I was twenty. I considered this, and then typed back. He knew an indoor climbing gym I may like. Rowan was definitely not a climber, and possibly not active at all. Let's go, I wrote back.

We never went rock climbing. Rowan was tired after work, so we met at his favorite bar for a beer. We exchanged many words—none of which moved me—but still, there was something about Rowan that held me there. He was kind. At ease. He did not try too hard for anything or anyone. I watched him lean forward in his chair to make a small, unremarkable comment, and then lean back, puffing his cigarette. There were no interesting stories, no hints at his success, no comments that packaged and handed him to me on a silver platter. He was not performing. It was like he was unaware of the stage life presented at all.

Rowan continued talking that night, but I heard nothing he said. Everything around me blurred as I breathed in his slow, baritone presence. I felt a deep urge to move closer, to curl up into him and make a home for myself. I'd be safe there, I knew. Nothing too wonderful or too terrible would ever happen. I invited him back to my place.

— — —  
Sadie. My eyes moved from blue sky to my mom's wide, brown eyes. God, I'm talking to you. How could you let this happen?

Was it the second or third time she had asked me this? I let my shoulders shrug up and down. The coffee was making me jittery. My fingers warred against each other in the distance between my navel and my lap.

Listen. She took a deep breath and when she spoke again, her tone was softer. I wish you had talked to me first. There is no perfect relationship. Relationships are hard.

I twisted the diamond on my ring finger around and around and around. Yes, I knew relationships were hard. I had watched hers, after all. I had watched my sisters, Isla's, my cousins. From the outside, of course, I knew only what one could gather from watching something intimate apart from it.

Everyone I knew had strings all over them—their navels, wrists, thighs. Some strings twisted and knotted, others rubbed and burned the skin. A few people still managed to move freely. Many tripped often, bruising their knees.

I scratched at my throat. There was a string there, coiled and tightening.

— — —

The first time Rowan slept over, I had a nightmare.

I was swimming freestyle in the ocean with my mom and sister. Below me I saw cloudy shades of black and blue as I swam quickly and with purpose. All of a sudden, my stomach clenched. Danger. I looked up to see a massive ship in front of me. The boat was turning, with the stern moving towards me from the right. I realized instantly that the boat was too close, moving too fast. There was no getting away. I watched the large, steel wall move closer. I felt the scrape of the propeller against my leg. I felt the momentum of the ship pull me towards it, and then, at the last minute, push me away again. Salt water stung my tongue and eyes. I turned my head to find my mom and sister, and saw them swimming fast in the opposite direction, away from me, away from the boat. “Why didn’t you warn me?” I screamed at them later in the dream. “How could you leave me there, swimming towards that ship?”

I began to see more and more of Rowan. A drink, a coffee, a walk. Sometimes, a friend of Rowan’s would stop by to join us, each of them another nutcracker variety of Rowan. They may have a different color hat, a different length of mustache, but they were basically the same: sociable enough to be out every night of the week, but relaxed enough to sit at the same bar for hours, chain smoking cigarettes. They talked about nothing and laughed often. Our time with them always hung somewhere in the middle of having fun and being miserable—a neutral purgatory so sweet you weren’t sure you were experiencing anything at all.

Rowan met my friends much later—game night. I was nervous: Rowan was not like my friends. He played his life four octaves lower than all of us. And yet, he mustered an enthusiasm for air hockey that I did not know he was capable of. He did all the required push-ups for each pin he did not knock down while bowling. My friends did not complain about him or accost me with any obvious red flags. He passed.

Slowly, we adopted one another.

— — —

When I was six, my mother read about the Nap Fairy in Family Fun magazine.

The Nap Fairy? My sister and I looked at each other and then back at mom with squinting eyes.

The Nap Fairy puts candy under the pillows of good boys and girls to who take naps. If you take a nap, she’ll come visit you.

Candy? We asked. Candy was not kept in the house. My mom nodded.

But I can’t nap. I never fall asleep, I told my mom. I try.

I guess you won’t get candy then. My mouth opened but then closed silently. My mom never took naps, and

slammed drawers loudly whenever dad accidentally fell asleep on the couch.

My sister and I went back to our shared room, discussed our discouragement that the Nap Fairy had never visited us before now, and then my sister fell asleep. I laid in bed, tossing and turning. My heart pounded.

I had once heard an adult mention “counting sheep” in order to fall asleep. I imagined a flock of sheep, and one by one I counted them. One...two...thirty-seven...sixty-five.

Nothing.

I imagined Jesus as the shepherd of the flock. Maybe Jesus could help me. Seventy-two...eighty-nine.

Nothing.

I decided to just lay in bed very still, as if I was actually sleeping. I let my mind fade into the secret places I kept there.

Eventually, mom opened the door. Rise and shine, my little nap princesses, she sang. She kissed each of us on the cheek. My sister reached under her pillow and pulled out a pack of Starburst. The Nap Fairy came!

I reached under my pillow. Nothing. I picked up the pillow and moved it aside. Nothing. My mouth opened and I looked at my mom.

I don’t have candy, I said.

Well did you nap?

I tried.

But did you actually sleep?

I may as well have! I laid here the whole time.

Honey, the nap fairy gives candy to good little girls who take real naps. My mom said this pleasantly. I was hot with anger. I held back tears.

The nap fairy had no tolerance for shades of grey. She rewarded one-hundred percent compliance.

— — —

Rowan and I liked none of the same things, but we liked each other. We settled into a routine of spending days apart, and coming home to each other at night. I worked, went hiking, met friends at yoga classes, hosted game nights at my apartment, and wrote bad poetry. Rowan worked, watched T.V. and met his friends at bars.

I looked forward to curling up in Rowan’s arms each evening, a place where nothing was expected from me or of me. Rowan gave affection freely and in large doses. Hugs, kisses, touches. Around him, there was a type of silence that engulfed me—necessary nothingness. No more constant productivity or self-flagellating thoughts. Nobody was trying to get me to do something or be something. I went blank, and Rowan swallowed me up.

The nightmares persisted on nights two, three, four, five and seven that Rowan slept over. After that, they stopped. I couldn’t remember any of my dreams at all.

— — —  
My mom moved to the end of her chair and looked deep into my eyes. So relationships are hard, honey. In the end, you just make a choice, a real commitment, and you stick to it. You just, she took her hand and smoothed down whips of white-blond hair that were flapping in the wind. You just hang in there, through the ups and downs. And you did make a commitment, didn't you?

I pressed the edge of my diamond ring hard into my thigh until it formed a sharp physical pain. Only then was I able to take a full breath.

You love Rowan, don't you?

I nodded. Of course I do.

That's what matters, sweetie. You're just nervous, that's all. She smiled with her mouth closed and another gust of wind blew through her hair. There's no such thing as absolute certainty, sweetie. Rowan is a good man. He's good for you.

My fingers found my lower lip and pinched it together.

The caterer's called and I told them we'd be by on Wednesday to finalize the menu, she said. They had to make some last-minute changes if we want to keep it seasonal. Mom tucked an unruly lock of hair behind her ear. Twelve more people RSVP'd, so we've accounted for almost everybody.

My muscles went limp. I slid further into my chair.

I could see myself in the white dress that I didn't prefer but looked great on me. I was holding a flower bouquet that was five times too large, with too much red and not enough blue. I hated the tux Rowan was wearing—grey. I preferred a classic black. I had agreed to all of this.

My shoulders drooped; my chin sagged towards my chest. How had I let this happen?

— — —  
One summer during college my sister took a psychology class. At night she would come into my room with her notebook, lay at the foot of my bed, and tell me what she had learned in class.

Do you think it's true what Jung said about the unlived lives of our parents? That we bear the burden of their unlived lives? Her dyed blonde hair with auburn low-lights hung off my bed and down towards the floor.

I don't know, I told her. I continued folding clothes and stacking them neatly in a drawer.

What do you think mom's unlived life is?

I placed a red t-shirt on the beige carpet and looked at her as she stared up at the ceiling. I had no idea what mom's unlived life was. I could only remember her busy, scattered with tasks that needed to be completed again tomorrow. She didn't seem happy and she didn't seem unhappy. I didn't know if she had dreams for her life. She definitely didn't talk about them.

I can't imagine mom living any other life, I told her. Maybe she's living the life she wants.

I continued folding clothes. I remembered mom, cooking dinner while fuming about the famous memoirist who left her husband when she no longer wanted to be married and traveled around the world. Her life is sad, mom said. I heard her criticizing our neighbor who decided to go to medical school with two young kids at home. She'll never see them, she said. Why even have kids if you aren't prepared to raise them? My mom seemed to detest women who did what they wanted with their lives.

I put the red t-shirt neatly in the bottom drawer of my dresser. I wondered if part of her wanted to leave, too. Early twenties, young children, no money, a husband who worked all the time. I wondered if she lay awake at night, fantasizing about running away from it all. But of course, she wouldn't. She had sacrificed herself to domesticity and motherhood. She was on a cross, just like Jesus.

What do you think mom's perfect daughter would be like? If she could create one, my sister said.

Skinny, I told her. Nice. Of service. Energetic. Always focusing on the needs of others. High-achieving, so she could brag about her. Fun. Organized. Self-controlled. Maybe even pretty.

I looked back at my sister and she looked at me. Her eyes fell to my narrow hips and thin legs. To the social justice books on my shelf. To my organized, tidy desk drawers. To the lacrosse trophies that lined the wall to my left.

She looked back at me. Neither of us said a word.

— — —  
One night, I woke up at three o'clock in the morning feeling feverish, legs tangled in sweaty sheets. I looked at Rowan sleeping peacefully beside me. I saw him a long way away, like I was looking at him through binoculars. Who are you? I thought. My whole life felt like a dream, something I watched without fully inhabiting.

I wiped the sweat off my body with a t-shirt, put on sweatpants, and left the apartment. The city streets were eerily silent and the moon full. My eyes were so captivated by the moon that I found myself tripping over bumps in the sidewalk. It was so big and so clear that I could see every little shadow present on it. My body buzzed and pulsed and stirred.

When I arrived at the park, I sat down under a large tree by the lake. The moon turned the water sparkling white, and my eyes feasted on it. Tears streamed down my cheeks. Nothing in my life felt this alive.

Right then, I called Rowan. He picked up the phone, mumbling something on the other end. Let's go away next weekend, to the beach or to the mountains, I said.

What? Where are you? he said.

I'm serious. Let's do something out of the ordinary. The two of us.

Okay, he said. We'll see.

I just feel like everything is so routine, so comfortable, so...fine.

Everything is fine, he said. I heard him exhale loudly on the other end.

He was right. I felt the desire to take all the fine things in my life—my job, my friendships, my relationship—and tear them up into a million little pieces.

I can't do fine anymore, I said.

Okay.

Do you want a relationship that's more than fine?

I don't know what you're talking about, he said, voice raspy with sleep. Christ, Sadie, it's the middle of the night. I'm going back to bed.

Heat built in my stomach and rose up to my throat. But I didn't speak, I just burned.

— — —  
A waitress appeared at our table and asked if we needed anything else. Just the check, my mom told her.

Mom put her purse on her lap and searched through it until she pulled out a tube of light pink lipstick. She put a thin coat on her bottom lip and then pursed her lips together. She held it out to me. Here, you look slightly pale, she said.

I put my sunglasses over my eyes looked at her, hand outstretched with a tube of lipstick. A scene begins to play on the inside of my sunglasses, and I watch intently. I watch myself take the lipstick and apply it delicately to my lips. I get up and hug her when she holds her arms open, and I walk next to her as she guides me towards my car. When she taps the hood I get in, fasten my seatbelt. "Tell Rowan I say hi," she says. I drive home like a machine on autopilot, and like a machine, I feel nothing. I can see Rowan from the front window of our house as I pull in the driveway. He is sitting on the couch in the living room, a grey couch that we put together from an Ikea box. My mother's face appears before me and she nods her head, wordlessly. I crawl through the front door of the house on my hands and knees. I beg for forgiveness.

My mother still has the lipstick in her hand. I lift my sunglasses up for a moment, trying to find reality. She is looking at me, waiting. I put my sunglasses over my eyes again, and another scene begins. I see the jerk of my body and then an overpowering force throws me forwards, across the café table, directly at my mother. Instantly, I am hot with anger. I watch myself lunge and grab and scream. I am an animal, a predator—intent to destroy. The rage seems to take over my body like a virus and overflow, seeping from the corners of my eyes in hot, desperate tears. My hands find my mom's shoulders and then neck, and I clench and hold. I realize what

I could do.

I tear the sunglasses off of my face. My mother puts the lipstick away and takes the last sip of her espresso.

I never wanted to be a puppet.

— — —  
After the phone call by the lake, I went home to Rowan. I slid into bed next to him, and he woke up just long enough to wrap his arms around me. He fell asleep again, but I remained awake, silent tears dripping from my eyes.

In the morning, drinking coffee in bed next to Rowan, I decided that he was right. Everything was fine. I wanted too much. I asked for too much.

From then on, I enjoyed what there was to enjoy about the relationship, and forgave each of the ways it disappointed me. I asked myself incessantly how I could ever find someone this accepting, this affectionate again. I couldn't give it up. And each time the sadness and rage and dissatisfaction grew too loud, I just ran back into Rowan's arms. There, everything was quiet. Everything was fine.

— — —  
You can fix this, my mother said. She waved her hand through the air like she was talking about a bit of red wine I got on the carpet. Don't even worry about that. She put both of her forearms on the café table and leaned towards me.

All you have to do to get Rowan to forgive you is just—

I looked up at the sky again. The Ionian Sea sky, that salty goddess, seemed to swirl down around me in that moment, engulf me with her misty breath. Everything stilled. Light bounced off kelly-green tree leaves. Birds chirped. Air was suddenly able to reach the entirety of my lungs. My mother's mouth was still moving, but I heard nothing. Here it was: my puppeteer training.

I noticed the stiffness of my mom's back, the constant straining of her neck as she talked. She looked so tired.

I smiled slightly. She meant so well. She'd never wanted life to be too difficult for me.

Below the table, I twisted the diamond ring off my finger and shoved it into my pocket. Then I got up and walked around the table. My mom's mouth stopped moving. I bent down and kissed her on the cheek, squeezed her shoulders. I looked right in her eyes.

I love you, mom. There was nothing more to say.

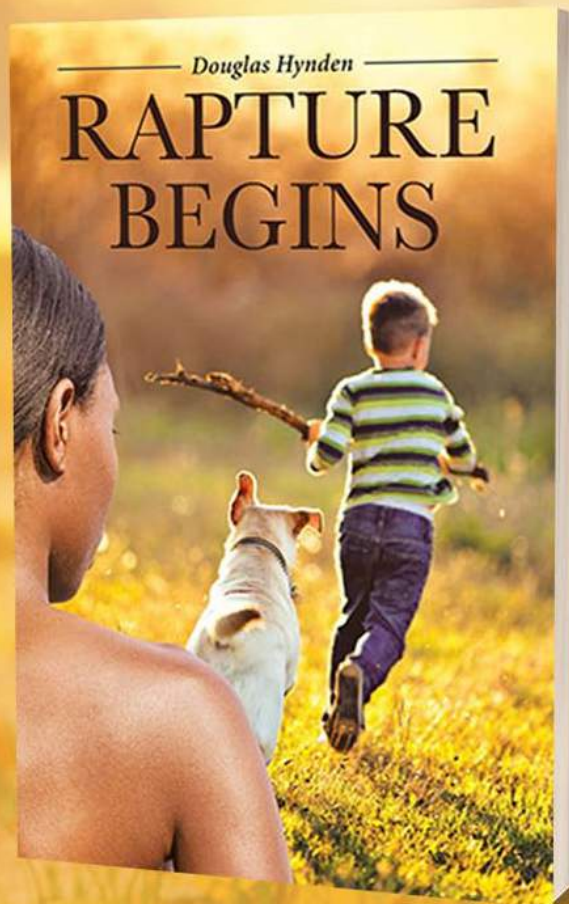
I already had a plane ticket. The Ionian Sea was waiting for me.

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Shannon Titus currently works as a teacher at an international school in Albania. She has been teaching and writing and traveling around the world for the past eight years.

— Douglas Hynden —

# RAPTURE BEGINS



AS A BOY, DAVID MEETS PEARL, AN INTERESTING MIDDLE-AGED WOMAN, WITH WHOM HE BECOMES SMITTEN. AS HE GROWS OLDER, PEARL SLOWLY ANSWERS DAVID'S MANY QUESTIONS ABOUT THINGS HAPPENING AROUND HIM. HOW WILL PEARL'S COME-AND-GO PRESENCE INFLUENCE DAVID AND HIS FUTURE?

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Tetiana Syrytsyna

# He Is Practicing It

E PENNIMAN JAMES

his disappearing act  
in the deli  
at the atm  
standing right next to you  
it took time  
years in fact  
to understand  
transparency  
the art of becoming invisible  
motion undetected  
to the naked eye  
a gust of wind  
unnoticed  
as he walks up the hill  
sometimes he will appear on the subway  
suddenly  
sitting across from some saxophone player  
he once knew  
or vanish  
in the middle of a swanky party  
he should never have been invited to anyway  
it makes it easier  
disappearing  
unnoticed  
no need to say goodbye  
when you weren't even there  
in the first place  
\*yesterday upon the stair  
i saw a man who wasn't there  
he wasn't there again today  
oh how i wish he'd go away

\*From *Antigonish* by Hughes Mearns

E Penniman James lives and writes poetry in Brooklyn, NY. He reads frequently at jazz jams and spoken word events in NYC. His poems have appeared in the anthologies *Birds Fall Silent in the Mechanical Sea* (Great Weather for Media, 2019) and *Lyrics of Mature Hearts* (Gordon Bois Publications, 2020), and several online publications.



zenina



## Ghost In The Garden

E PENNIMAN JAMES

riding an exercise bike  
in the garage  
skiing  
in the laundry room  
just hanging around  
ghost in the kitchen  
making banana bread  
overripe fruit  
beautiful shade of brownish black  
deteriorating  
mashed to a pulp  
ghost in the bedroom  
underneath the covers  
between the sheets  
whispered words  
pillow talk  
cold comfort  
ghost on the toilet  
laughing  
people thinks the ghost  
always worrying about the future  
time to wake up and die right  
there's nothing but the past



zenina

# Once There Was A Church

E PENNIMAN JAMES

the church of the redeemer  
sitting silent as a monk  
pacific  
once there was a grand edifice  
standing proudly  
good shepherd  
shelter for the flock  
once there was a newsstand  
three foot square made of tin  
on the corner where the el used to run  
with a drunken proprietor  
once there was a pizza parlor  
next to a chinolatino restaurant  
next to a luncheonette  
that specialized in doughnuts  
once there was a pickle slice  
came with your sandwich  
half sour  
on the house  
once there was a barber shop  
right up the block  
where an old guy worked  
with his wife upstairs  
watching tv





# Steve in Trouble

RAFIQ EBRAHIM

Unaware of an unexpected nerve-wrecking experience Steve was about to face, he felt exalted, right on top of the world, waving at friendly clouds on that spring afternoon as he entered a sophisticated Toy store in a Chicago suburb to buy some toys for the twins—his two four-year old grandsons. The store was amassed with toy figures that peered at him through their small glassy eyes, about to attack like zombies. He was in no mood to take zombies home and thrust them on the delicate kids.

"Hide and Seek" by Efe Karadagli  
Website: <https://efekaradagli.com/>  
Instagram: @efekaradagli\_illustration

As he was about to walk out, a little kid with large thick glasses resting on his nose came in the way. Steve was knocked down on the aisle displaying zombies. The kid duly apologized, and Steve walked out.

He had only gone a few feet away when he heard footsteps behind him. A zombie? No, it was an obese cashier. "Excuse me, sir. There is an action figure stuck to your jacket. Did you pay for it?"

Steve was taken aback. Just how that toy got stuck to the jacket by the sleeve? "Oh, that," he said casually. "Must have stuck accidentally. I am sorry. Here, take this." He tried to get the thing off, but it was stuck so firmly that he couldn't.

"I am sorry; you must come inside. The manager wants to have a word with you."

"Don't want to come in where zombies abound," said Steve.

"You have to," said the cashier. "If you resist, I will have to call our security man, whom we lovingly call the gunman."

"Don't want to see him. Gunmen usually shoot first and then say hi."

Steve had to go inside and came face to face with the manager, a sturdy woman with sparkling white teeth and determined jaws, obviously belonging to one of those special breeds of human beings ever ready to pounce upon you any moment without notice. She took Steve to a small room at the back of the store where he saw a heavy-set short guy with a gun in a holster tucked under his belt, looking like a professional executioner about to do his job. "This is James Basher, our security man," introduced the manager.

"The merchandise is still on your person," said the guy, raising his right bushy eyebrow skeptically and putting his hand on the gun meaningfully. He ordered Steve to sit down on a chair, and as he sat, he felt sinking deep down. Perhaps there was a suction force below and his feet got raised a few inches off the floor.

"Yes, this figure somehow got stuck to the jacket and I just can't get it off," he managed to say, feeling utterly helpless in that posture.

"Don't worry," said the sturdy manager. "We have means to get it off. A little cut with a sharp knife would do the job."

"No way!" Steve blurted. "You are not going to damage my Armani jacket. Besides, you are badly mistaken. I am not a shoplifter, believe me. Do you seriously think I stole this thing?"

"Every shoplifter says that," said the heavy-set guy. "Once when I was working at a jewelry shop, a man, who by the way looked like you, walked out with a gold ring attached to his shirt. Later he confessed that it was not by accident, and that shoplifting was his hobby."

The woman laughed and her laughter was malicious because of the set of big white teeth grinding, hungry for a bite off Steve's neck.

"So, what are you going to do?" Steve asked in a voice cracking with anxiety.

"Just sign on the dotted line," said the security guy, producing a document. He looked at the paper. It said that he had stolen the merchandise. "Do you think I am an imbecile? Why should I sign there? Hey, let me take off this silly thing," he said, trying once again to get the figure off the sleeve.

"You won't be able to do that," he said. "It has a layer of potent glue at the back. Now, look here, if you won't sign, we must call the police for your arrest." *Thank God, he didn't say that he would execute*

*me right away, thought Steve.*

"Hell!" Steve yelled. "Go on, call the cops. I have nothing to fear since I didn't steal that toy."

The manager reached for the phone and called a number in her jarring voice.

"Wait till the cops arrive. They won't believe you. They would immediately hand-cuff you and whisk you away," said the manager.

It was a grave situation. *What would my family members and friends think when they come to know about this happening? And what be the effect on my four grandsons? Surely, the eldest and the most observant would not hesitate to put down in his log—the one he has kept recording all the negative acts done by his relatives—as 'my grandpa was once put behind the bars for shoplifting.'* These thoughts began to haunt Steve.

Some ten anxious minutes later the police—a one-cop force—arrived. Steve's face lit up. The cop was his old friend Mike Benson. He was employed by Steve's former employers, a large retail outlet store, to do an off-time job as a security officer, years back. He was a good friend of Steve.

"Hi, Mike," Steve said. "Nice to see you after a long time."

He looked at Steve for a second. His face showed an expression of restrained mirth and then immediately he made a stern face. "Don't pretend that you know me."

Steve was shocked. His frayed nerves needed soothing medicine. Mike, the flirty cop with whom he had boozed and taken slices of pizzas years back, now refused to recognize him!

There followed a short conference, before Mike grabbed Steve's arm to pull him out of that entrapping chair and take him away, but not before the payment score was settled. Steve had to pay twenty-five dollars for that ghastly figure that seemed to remain on his jacket.

Once they came out, Mike burst into a peal of laughter. "My friend, I never imagined that one day I would find you in that ridiculous chair with your feet up in the air and that I would be called in to arrest you."

"Thank God, your memory still works," said Steve, now in control of his army of nerves. "So, what are you going to do? Take me to the police station and get me booked?"

"Of course not! Could I ever believe that you are a shoplifter? My very good friend who always had a great respect for law and order? I just pretended that I didn't know you to appease those people at the store." Saying so, he gave Steve an affectionate hug.

"Thanks, Mike. Do I have to get in your police car, or I can drive my own?"

"I'll tell you what? Just get into my car and we will go to that Mexican restaurant, have pizza and a drink to revive old memory."

"But what about this zombie figure? How can I get it off?"

"Go to a chemist. He will be of help, but if you don't want to damage your jacket, let it remain stuck to it as a memento!"

---

Rafiq Ebrahim is a freelance writer and novelist. His short stories and articles are frequently published in Pakistani, Indian, and US magazines. He is a Science Graduate from the University of Karachi, Pakistan, and has over fifteen years of experience in the Advertising profession.





## April

JOSHUA WARREN

She's shying away from the rain,  
seeking shelter  
underneath the awning.

Pressed against the window,  
she's leaving her heavy sighs on the glass  
to the gentle piano melody  
on the other side, restoring her breaths'  
foggy manifestations before  
they have a chance to vanish.

The pianist's fingers are gliding,  
landing as the raindrops are,  
inventing life as the raindrops are.

She is born out of the music's sweetest note,  
she is its heaviest drop.  
Rippling.

Together, we're unraveling,  
then tying the strings in the fabric  
of ourselves back around each other  
in knots.

She exchanges cold, green paper  
for rolled paper.  
Burning, the trojan horses aren't any secret to her.  
She's continuing to ignore the general's printed warning,  
letting the cavalry gallop between her lips  
and charge into her chest.

With every drag,  
she's exhaling her own life,  
killing herself as slowly as she breathes,  
fogging up the glass.

Even gentle rain can't convince her  
to put it out.

The glow at the end of her fingertips  
defying what I thought was possible,

I'm watching  
as she makes dying look beautiful.

Joshua Warren is an aspiring writer who has not been published anywhere before. He is a third-year Psychology and English double major at the University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Zackery Blanton

The world is the oyster to whoever is willing  
To do what it takes to  
To make it theirs  
What you have to do is give it away

To shine some light on the difference between  
Your finest hour and your darkest one  
Is a matter of character  
Tune in  
Tune out to static  
Eyes melt, feelings melt  
Into puddles at the foot and on the tongues of your sneakers

You're beautiful  
Beautiful enough to want to  
Bear your name  
Your body safe of clouds  
And rain

Let the lessons you learn  
Radiate humanity  
Give and take what is human-made  
Humankind, of human souls and skeletons  
And bear witness to,  
Vow to fix  
What isn't yet too late  
Before there is nothing left to breathe

Fighting the rage of the machines  
Evil habits will die harder  
Humans  
Less humane than we thought

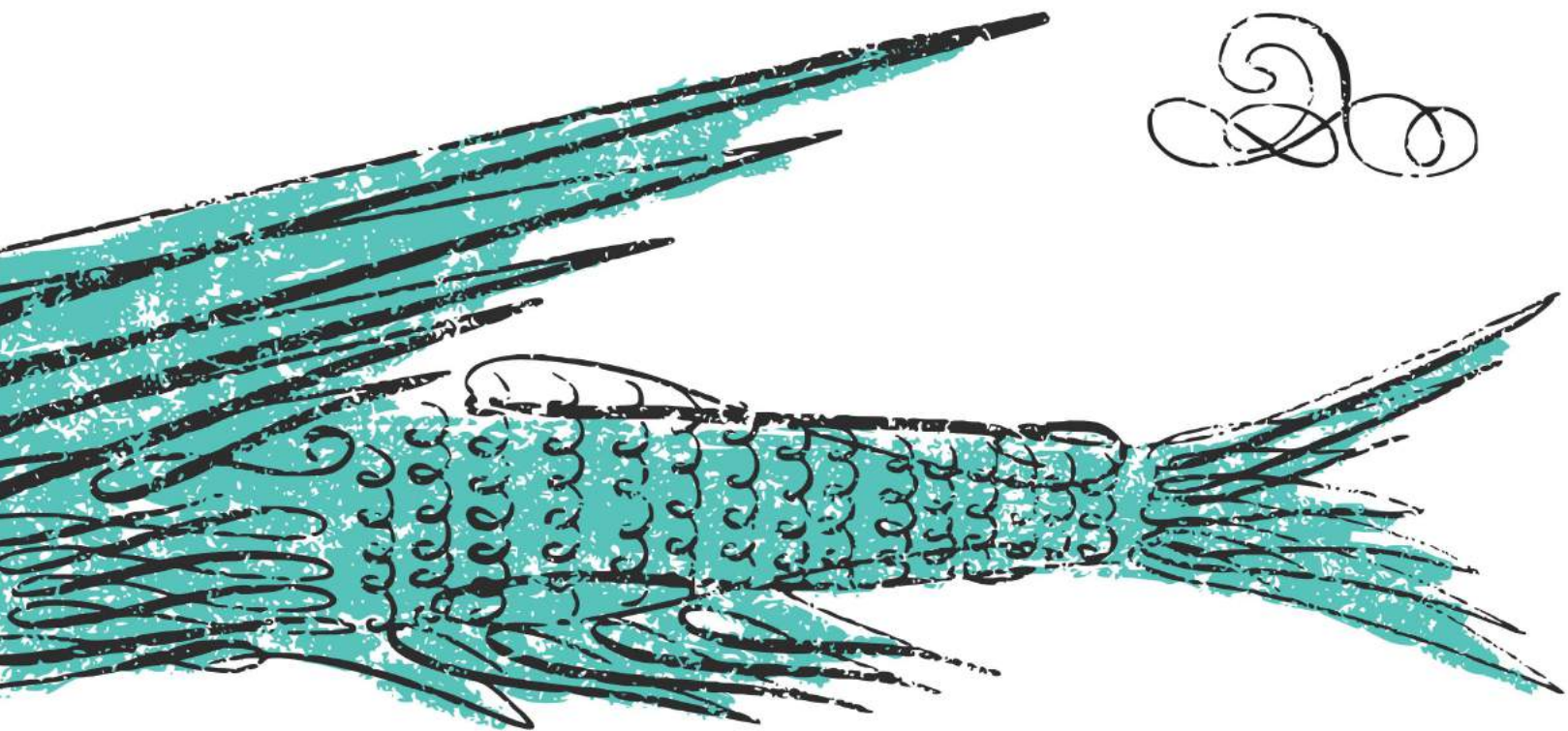
The last-minute is ticking away  
The seconds the same for everyone  
No one is safe

Keep the clocks to pretend to  
Control against the illusion  
Stronger than perception  
Stronger than knowledge  
Or arts or sciences or our dreams

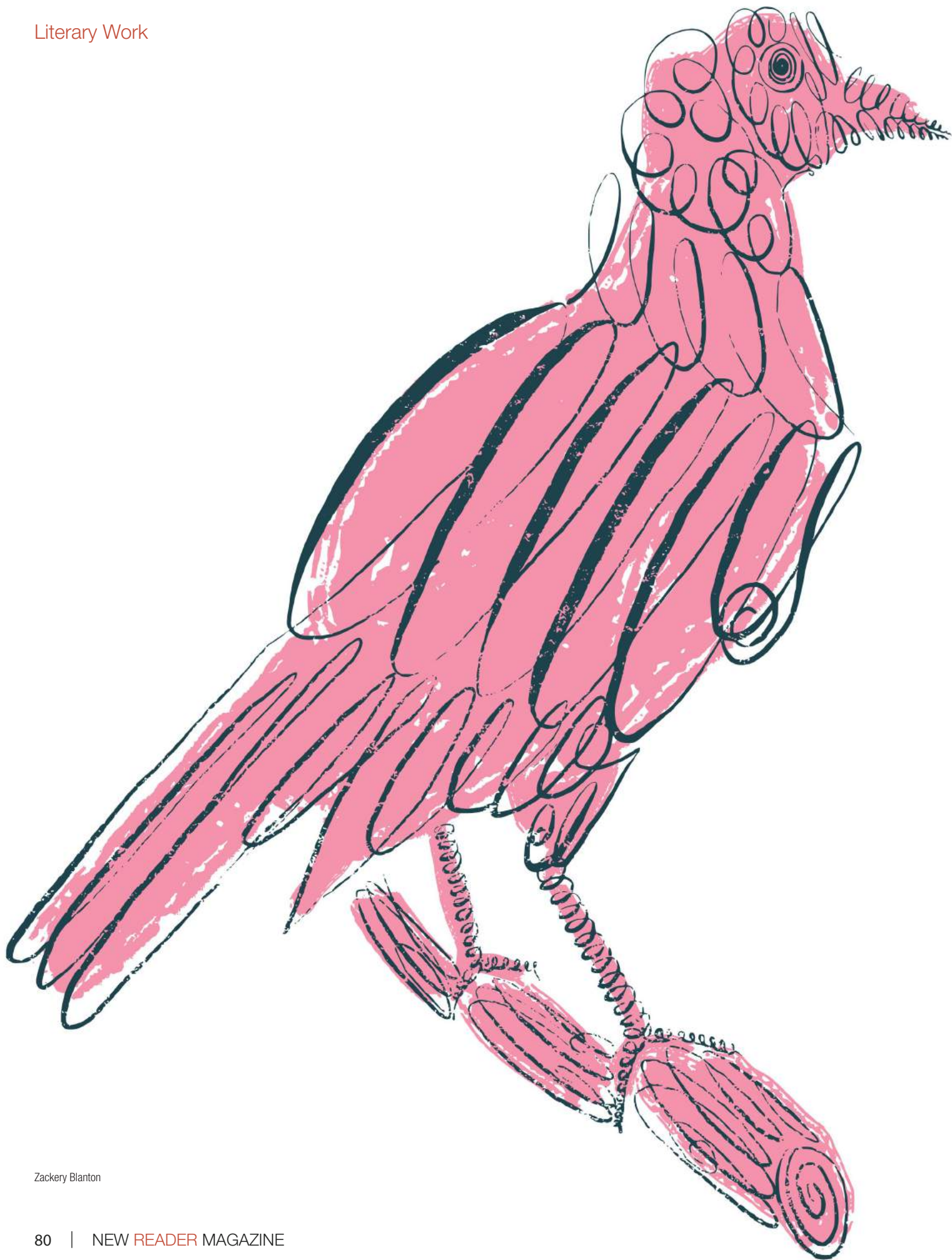


# The Limitations of Our Control (1.4 Degrees Fahrenheit)

JOSHUA WARREN



Zackery Blanton



Zackery Blanton

# On Tuesdays

JOSHUA WARREN

On Tuesdays, I'll play darts in a jazz club basement  
On West 129th St.

It will be foggy and hot and, of course, will smell of  
Swishers and cheap cigarillos.

An old man will hide his ebony wrinkles  
underneath the shadow of his hat in the corner on a creaky barstool  
and play his saxophone,

Sad and slow.

I'll listen to him every Tuesday night, throwing darts while  
he holds out his smooth notes  
and manipulates brass and wind like there's magic in  
his breath and fingers.

Every hour, he'll set down his sax and waddle over  
to rest his chops at the mahogany bar.

"The regular, Jim." He'll always say  
But Jim will already have it made behind the counter:  
A scotch neat, and he'll sip it slow.

"Just enough to wet the whistle."  
He'll always say.

I'll set my darts down to take the stool beside him and  
slide Jim enough to cover his drink and one of my own,

and the old man will smile.

"Is it Tuesday again?" He'll always ask  
and I'll nod.  
He'll pull out a cigarette  
and lean across the bar for Jim to light it.

He'll offer me one, and I'll shake my head.

"You know, my father was one of the best in Harlem,"  
he'll always say,  
after a pull of the burning paper.

"He taught me everything I know about jazz and blues,"  
he'll always say.

He'll shoot down the scotch, drag his brittle bones  
back to his stool and he'll lean back,  
Sax in his hands, and he'll let  
his soul melt out of it.

Sad and Slow

I'll finish my drink and my dart game  
and slide into my coat.

He'll pull the mouthpiece away from his cracked lips  
"Have a good night now,"  
he'll always say.  
"And if I'm not here next time, you know I went to see Emily,"  
he'll always say,  
smiling with his crooked and yellow teeth.

I headed down the stairs,  
the old boards with its splinters and creaks and  
nails out of place,

Into the jazz club basement.  
Tuesday again, except now,  
a young, white man  
was playing the blues on his saxophone,

Sad and Slow.

# Marigold

MADISON VAN NORTWICK

**M**y Grandma drives me to and from school every day, but I have to sit in the backseat so her dog can sit up front in its leopard print car seat. The dog is a shorkie which is a mix between a shiatzus and a yorkie. I call it a shit-key. Grandma hates when I say that. My mom can't drive me because she has to work all the time. My dad used to drive me but they took away his license because he doesn't know the alphabet backwards. Grandma's not the best driver though. One time she drove the wrong way on a one way street and almost killed us. It took an hour for the dog to calm down. She bought me a slushy if I agreed not to tell Mom, but I wouldn't have told her anyway.

Boyan Dimitrov

“Have you ever seen someone dead in the wild?” I ask.

“In the wild?” asks Grandma.

“Yeah”

“Like in the jungle?”

“No like in the street or at a restaurant or something.

Not in a hospital, or at a funeral or somewhere you’d expect to see a dead person.”

Grandma tells me about a time when she saw a kid from her school get hit by a car on his bike. The guy who hit him drove off and they never figured out who it was. Grandma saw the whole thing and still remembers the driver’s face. She says he looked annoyed as he threw his car in reverse, like he had just hit a possum and was worried it might have damaged his wheel. When the kid got hit one of his little blue sneakers flew off and landed in her yard. She kept the shoe in the garage for years later like she expected the kid to walk in one day looking for it.

“And you saw him dead?” I asked.

“Well I don’t know if he was dead when I saw him, but he looked pretty dead to me.”

Grandma always answers my crazy questions. My parents say I shouldn’t ask her stuff like that because she has dementia which is some kinda disease that takes your filter. One time I told my dad that I wished everyone would get dementia so they wouldn’t have a filter too. He said I would regret saying that someday when Grandma doesn’t remember me. But me and Grandma made up a code word just in case she does forget me: marigold. We picked marigold because it is her third favorite flower, her very favorite would’ve been too obvious. I say it every time I see her, every time I leave, and about ten times in-between. So when I see her when the dementia is bad I’ll say marigold and she’ll know it’s me and not some imposter granddaughter. She always says it right back and presses her forehead real hard into mine, I guess to prove her brain still works.

Grandma is helping me make my Halloween costume. She does the sewing and she says I’m the creative director. Last summer Grandma made me do sewing lessons at Joann’s Fabric, but I wasn’t very good. She still makes me wear the turquoise pajama pants I made whenever we have sleepovers even though one leg is way longer than the other and I always trip over it. I like watching Grandma’s hands when she sews. Her skin is wrinkly everywhere else like a normal grandma’s, but her hands are smooth and they always smell like Pons and laundry detergent.

Me and Grandma have been working on this costume for weeks. I am being an artichoke, my favorite food. Grandma thought that was a great idea for a costume and said that all the girls in school will ask where I got it and when they do I should say ‘straight-off-the-runway in Paris’ and wiggle my artichoke butt at them.

“Do you think I’ll look like a big green vagina?” I ask.

“Not like any vagina I’ve ever seen,” Grandma says. She doesn’t look up until she finishes the leaf she is sewing. When she finally looks back up at me she says, “We will get you a purple flower for your head. Artichokes flower, you know?” We decide that will make me look less like a big green vagina. Grandma says she’ll make my flower headband and have it ready for tomorrow. Mom’s car pulls into Grandma’s driveway and she honks for me to come outside.

“Marigold,” I say.

“Marigold,” she says and smushes her head into mine.

The next day I run into Grandma’s house without saying anything. I grab the bundle of green felt and purple flower headband and run upstairs to try it on. There’s a bathroom downstairs I could have changed in but then I couldn’t make the dramatic descent down the stairs that I really want. Grandma will probably pretend to be a paparazzi taking pictures with nothing in her hand and make fake camera noises.

I slide the costume on and slap the flower headband on my head. My head is a weird shape so the headband keeps falling down in front of my face. I glide my hand down the railing as I walk down the stairs like I am being presented at a debutante ball. I imagine being presented as Miss Arty Choke, daughter to Sir Broccoli and Mrs. Asparagus. The green felt from my costume ruffles with every step I take down. My purple flower headband falls in my face again and when I put it back in place I see Grandma at the bottom of the steps.

Grandma is looking around like she’s a time traveler who hasn’t figured out what year she’s in yet. She is picking at her nails which makes that sound I really hate. I make it to the bottom of the stairs, and she still doesn’t look at me. Grandma is scanning all of the family photos hung in the room like it is her first time seeing them. The dog is pawing at her and she kicks it off. I say Marigold and she looks at me.

“Oh yes you look like a beautiful marigold, but we need to switch that purple flower with a golden one.”

I say it over and over again until she shushes me and takes off my headband. She pets my hair back in the way that I like and we stay like that for a long time. I didn’t say marigold after that day. Sometimes she would remember me. Other times she wouldn’t recognize me right away, but later the dumb-entia would go away and we would have a few minutes together and I would hurry to tell her stuff before it came back. It always came back and soon it was mostly dementia and just a little bit of Grandma. When she died we took the shit-key and I let it ride in the front seat because Grandma would’ve liked that.

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Madison Van Nortwick was born in Denver, Colorado. She graduated from The University of Kansas with a degree in Creative Writing and now works as a News Analyst in Phoenix, Arizona. She spends her time drinking a lot of coffee and hanging out with her dog, Fish.



# Eagle House

ROBERT KINERK

Five seniors—three boys and two girls—skipped their last class at Boon High on the second of May in 1957 and, without planning to do such a cruel thing, they killed an eagle. A boy named Burt had sparked their afternoon of hooky. He had said at lunch the day was too nice to spend in Civics class learning about the separation of powers. Sunshine, rare in southeast Alaska, called to him. He said Mr. Danvers, who taught Civics, droned in ways that put him to sleep.

Lane, one of the boys he made his pitch to, had just put a new engine in his 1951 Plymouth.

"We could get to Sarrs Lake in ten minutes," Burt said.

Lane knew better, but the way Burt grinned made the ten-minute mark a challenge.

Burt and his friends—Lane and Sharon, Morris and Marion—piled into Lane's boxy car and sped away. On the lake's gravel beach, under a blue sky, the boys shouted wisecracks and chased the girls. Those hi-jinx continued until something stirring near a trash barrel froze them

in place. Burt whispered, “A rat, a big rat,” to get a rise out of the girls. The girls squealed but just as they did, an eagle with a broken wing limped out from behind the barrel and hobbled for the woods.

The three boys whooped and chased the bird. It splashed across a creek. They splashed after it. The bird fought its way into the underbrush beneath the hemlocks and spruce trees. The boys, seizing sticks, pounded after. They trapped the bird against a fallen hemlock. The eagle clawed at the air with its talons and batted its good wing to ward its tormentors off, but all three closed in, swinging their sticks like clubs until the bird dropped beneath their repeated blows. Burt saw its eyes go lifeless, like a light turned out.

From the other side of the creek, unable to see what was going on, Sharon and Marion shouted, “What happened?” No boy answered, but Burt picked up the dead eagle by its left wing, and Morris lifted it by its right wing. Burt also held its bloody head and waggled and screeched as he and Morris burst out of the brush to try frightening the girls.

Marion and Sharon, though, were more curious than scared. They wanted to know what had broken the bird’s wing. Sharon asked if it was a boy or a girl.

The five friends guessed the eagle was a juvenile who had fallen from the nest. Its broken wing kept it from flying back. Even if the boys hadn’t killed it, Burt said, the bird would have died a cruel death from dogs or from starvation.

The solemnity of such an undeserved end to a wild thing’s life kept the five friends silent for a moment, but Burt was not one to stay untouched by mischief. He told his friends if they could sneak the eagle into school, they could hide it in some unsuspecting person’s locker.

Sharon and Marion instantly named a popular girl, Lacey Hamilton, who, they said, always left her locker combination in the *open* mode. The friends stuffed the eagle in the Plymouth’s trunk. At school, Burt hid it as best he could under his jacket. His friends walked in a protective screen around him, even though school by then was out and chances were slim they’d be seen. They had chosen an entrance only yards from Lacey’s locker. In less than a minute, Burt had jammed the eagle in, hanging it from Lacey’s coat hook. Without a word, as if by pre-arrangement, everyone left. Each boy found his own way to the street. The girls walked together, which they almost always did, so if they were seen there would be nothing to warrant suspicion.

Next morning, Lacey came charging in late. She raced to her locker. Lane and Burt lurked close to the library’s door, anticipating Lacey’s shriek. Burt pretended to take an interest in a display of books about the First World War, but he could see Lacey and follow her dash down the hall. He watched her pull her locker open. He heard her shriek, “A bird!” He saw kids up and down the hall turn to stare.

Burt dodged into the stacks, and when he couldn’t keep his snorts of laughter suppressed he tried to mask them as coughs. Lane disappeared towards a boys’ room. For the rest of the day, Burt and Lane and the other three kept their faces straight while they listened to kids talk about the bird in Lacey’s locker. Even catching one another’s eye, they maintained their poker faces. It became a matter of pride.

That night, Burt dreamed an eagle tried to talk to him. He saw it in a grassy field on the lip of a shallow cove. The eagle’s shrieks were exactly the kind of shrieks he had made when he’d pretended to make eagle sounds. He wouldn’t have thought more about his dream except Marion, when he tried to make a joke of it for her, interrupted him to say she had read an article about finding out what dreams mean. “You sit in a chair with another chair opposite you,” Marion explained. “You pretend your dream is

in the opposite chair, and you speak to it as if it were a person.”

“What do you say?”

“Well, if the mystery in your dream is an eagle, you ask the eagle what it’s trying to tell you.”

“What happens then?”

“You listen to what it says. It’s supposed to tell you what you asked about.”

Burt would have tried questioning his dream in the privacy of his bedroom that night except his brother, Ted, sat polishing his shoes. Burt couldn’t look toward Ted’s bed and pretend there was an eagle there. When he looked, he saw his younger brother with a shoe brush in his hand. Burt had to put his experiment off, not just for that night but for the next one, too.

On Sunday, he went to Mass, and because of a family tradition he had to take communion. In his family, on the Sunday closest to a person’s birthday, everyone approached the altar together to take Holy Communion. The Wednesday following that Sunday would be Burt’s eighteenth birthday. He knew a Catholic isn’t supposed to accept the host on his tongue if he’s burdened with a mortal sin, but he had to line up with his mother and father at the communion rail. He didn’t know if killing an eagle counted as a sin, but what he’d done was cruel. He knew it was a moral flaw to kill a wounded, living thing.

Back home, after breakfast, Ted biked off to see friends. Burt had the bedroom to himself. He sat on his messy bed and tried to imagine an eagle on Ted’s bed. At first, he was too self-conscious to say out loud, ‘Eagle, what are you doing in my dream?’ He only thought that question, then he crossed to Ted’s bed and waited for an answer. He couldn’t concentrate because the experience of seeing his side of the room from Ted’s side was so unusual. He and Ted were careful about observing an invisible line that ran like a boundary between their different halves of the room. Burt had to go back to his own bed and steel himself to speak aloud.

This time, after asking from his bed what the eagle wanted of him, and then returning to Ted’s side of the room, words immediately came. “Go to the dump.” Burt heard that sentence as if the eagle from his dream had given a command.

Boon burned its garbage in open fires on a bluff above the Narrows, north of town. The smoke was an eyesore, and so many rats threaded their way through mounds of trash sharpshooters went there to practice.

At dinner, Burt said he wanted to go to the movies and asked if he could borrow the car. “A birthday treat?” his mother chirped, and his father said, “Take Ted.” Burt glanced at Ted. His brother nodded yes. He did it eagerly, and Burt thought, “There goes the dump trip.”

But Boon had two theaters, separated by about a block. One of them was playing a Randolph Scott western Ted said he wanted to see. Burt at once said he didn’t like Randolph Scott and would find out what was playing at the other theater, called the Deluxe. He said he’d meet his brother at the car afterwards. He parked and let Ted off. He trotted toward the Deluxe, but when Ted had disappeared he ran back to the car and drove to the dump.

The rays of the setting sun, when they came streaming through the garbage dump’s layers of smoke, looked like fingers reaching from the sky. Burt parked on tamped-down dirt and stood squinting in the smoke, smelling the garbage stench. He thought he was alone until a movement among the garbage mounds caught his eye. An old woman in layers of sweaters and skirts hobbled out of coils of smoke and shuffled toward him. She carried a cardboard box filled with salvaged objects. When she

dropped the box at Burt's feet, he saw the gas tank from a motorcycle, its paint almost entirely worn off, and the nozzle from a gas pump. The nozzle had been slashed off its orange hose in such a violent way it looked like something with its throat cut.

The old woman lifted her head—a difficult move because her back was so bent. “Take me,” she commanded. She kicked the box. Burt, because the old and dirty woman had spoken like a boss, interpreted that to mean he was to pick the box up and put it in the car.

The woman slid into the passenger seat. When Burt had taken his place behind the wheel, she pointed to the right, the direction to town. After that, whenever there was a choice of which way to go, she'd point. Obeying her directions, Burt threaded his way through town and crossed a trestle bridge over a creek. The creek was like a dividing line between the part of Boon where Burt and all his friends lived, and the part called Indiantown. Crossing the creek was like crossing a border, but it was a border that people couldn't bring themselves to name. It was too vulgar to say *Indiantown*, though in earlier days the name had been common.

“Stop”

Burt, when the woman abruptly spoke, had driven to a rise. He knew he shouldn't stop there because he'd block the view of drivers behind him. But he saw no cars in his rear-view mirror, so he did stop. He opened the trunk, lifted out the box, and expected the old woman would take it. But when he turned with that burden, he saw her already climbing a flight of stairs. The glance she shot back commanded him to follow. The plank stairs led to a plank walk. The walk turned many angles, like a forest trail.

The house where the woman finally stopped was on the hill's highest point. It sat facing one of Boon's small-boat harbors, and, across the harbor, the cone-shaped incinerator of the spruce mill. The woman, in front of a door on a level with the wood walk, was feeling through her pockets for her key. Burt said, “I'll leave this here,” and he bent to set the box by her feet. He was worried about the car, afraid it might attract a policeman's attention. When he said, “I'll leave this,” though, the woman said, “Come in, eagle-killer boy.”

Burt dropped the box. He turned. He ran. On the street, a driver blocked by Burt's parked car leaned on his horn. Burt yelled, “Sorry,” but the driver shouted, “Asshole,” as Burt drove off.

Burt parked where he had parked before. For fifteen minutes he sat puzzling over what had happened. He had obeyed the promptings of a dream. The dream had taken him to the garbage dump, where an old woman had materialized, seemingly out of smoke. She had given him orders. He had obeyed, and his reward was being called *eagle-killer*.

Had someone seen him at the lake? Had someone told? How else would the woman have known? And he wasn't an eagle-killer. He was an ordinary boy who had happened to help kill an eagle. He couldn't say he had killed it in kindness, but the killing could be interpreted, almost, as an act of kindness.

Burt glanced at his watch, trying to guess when Ted might saunter into view. The thought of his brother made him remember he had better know what movie the Deluxe was showing. He ran and learned it was a comedy, and the star was Fred MacMurray.

At home, Burt's mother served birthday cake and ice cream. “This is not a party,” she said when the family had gathered around the table. She said she knew perfectly well what Burt's date of birth was because she had been there when it happened. “This is a special birthday, though, so that justifies an early celebration.”

“A milestone. Eighteen.” Burt's dad clapped him on the shoulder

the way a man does when he wants to say congratulations to another man. On birthdays before, his dad would have hugged him, but now, to both of them, an embrace would have seemed too childish.

Next day he told Marion about the bent, old woman and the eagle house. He and Marion had been told to report to the principal's office. They had to sit and wait until Miss Laughlin would see them. The principal always kept a person called to her office sitting outside her door. ‘Miss Laughlin’ was the only name students ever used for their principal. They didn't give her a nickname like they did for some of their teachers. She was too strict to have a nickname. Sitting outside her door, Burt assumed they'd been called about the eagle, and his conversation with Marion had been a whispered one so none of the girls who worked as aides in the office could hear.

“You didn't go to that house,” Marion whispered. “You only dreamed it.”

She couldn't say more because Miss Laughlin opened her door. “Happy birthday, Burt,” the principal said. She did not mean it as a pleasantry. She said it as a little dig that would remind Burt he was now older and would not be treated as a child. He said, “Thank you,” as he filed past her. He and Marion took his seat in the dim light, Burt feeling like a person awaiting execution.

Miss Laughlin began to lecture, not about the dead bird in Lacey Hamilton's locker but about skipping Civics class and playing hooky. Marion was so glad the lecture wasn't the eagle she started to cry. Burt didn't cry but was very apologetic, and when Miss Laughlin said he would have detention every afternoon that week, he didn't argue. He said, “Okay,” when the principal told the two students she'd be talking to Lane and Sharon and Morris about skipping class, too.

Burt, who felt let off the hook, nodded, but his thoughts went at once to what Marion had whispered. He couldn't just have dreamed the house. He had driven to the dump. He had been bossed around. He'd checked about the movie with Fred MacMurray in it. If it was just a dream, he thought, there would be no eagle house. He would not have seen what he knew he saw, and the way to prove it was to go see it again.

He didn't know how he could easily make that return, but that evening at dinner a lucky thing happened. Lane called to say the battery on his Plymouth had failed. He asked if Burt could borrow his dad's car and meet him at Lowell Beach to jump start his engine.

Burt's dad said to take Ted, but Ted didn't want to go. He needed to study for a test in World History.

Burt and his father went through the Nash's trunk to make sure the jumper cables were where they should be. His father reviewed the procedures for jump-starting and made Burt repeat them back. Twenty minutes later, Burt reached Lowell Beach—south of town, well past the old woman's flight of wood stairs. He helped Lane restart the Plymouth and then watched his friend roar around the parking lot before he gave a thank-you wave and sped off.

Alone in the lot, seated in the Nash again, Burt sat for a moment drumming his fingers on the steering wheel and turning over in his mind what he'd do next. He saw himself climbing the stairs. If he didn't see the old woman's house, that would prove Marion had been right. If he *did* see the house, what would that prove? He had no clear idea. He let his hands drop to his lap and spent a minute flexing them into the shape of claws. When someone in a gold DeSoto pulled into the gravel parking space, Burt switched on the ignition and drove responsibly to town.

One block south of the old woman's stairs, he parked in the lot of a bowling alley. He bounded up the walk and stairs, arriving breathless at

the top, where he saw the house as solid and shabby as he remembered it from before. “There,” he said to himself, as if proof had been provided he couldn’t argue with. He had not dreamed the house. It stood before his eyes. That was all he’d wished to know.

He turned to hurry off, but his way was blocked by two big boys, Natives about his own age. They stood shoulder to shoulder like a human wall across the narrow walk. When they advanced, they came in lock step, like soldiers. Their menacing approach forced Burt to back away until the house blocked him from further retreat. Behind him, the door opened. He heard the old woman speak in her croaky voice. “Look.” When Burt turned, he saw the faint shadow of the bent, old crone in the room’s dark interior. She pointed at a sculpture on a pine table just inside the door. The sculpture had been assembled, in part, out of the junk Burt had helped the woman bring from the dump. The slashed-off nozzle rose out of the fuel tank. In a primitive or abstract way, the nozzle looked like the head of an eagle. The fuel tank could have been that bird’s big body. On the left side of the fuel tank the tines from a garden rake lay spread out like a wing. On the right, the spokes from a bicycle wheel—freed of their rim, with half the spokes missing—gave the same impression. One talon was a pastry tool with blade rollers. There was no second talon.

As soon as Burt noticed the missing claw, the old woman closed the door. Burt turned. The boys had vanished. He ran past where they’d been all the way to the street, where a worse surprise awaited.

“You’re going to get it, Burt!”

Lacey Hamilton shouted from the passenger seat of her boyfriend’s Chevy.

Burt had made Lacey the victim of his locker joke. Now she knew. Her boyfriend, Judd, thrust his muscled arm out the driver’s window, his middle finger raised. Burt froze to watch the pair drive off, Judd’s slow departure a syrupy insolence. Burt didn’t budge until Judd’s Chevrolet was out of sight, and when he hurried back to his father’s car, he kept looking over his shoulder in case Judd came speeding back.

At home, upstairs in the bedroom they shared, Burt found Ted bent over the large volume of his World History text. Ted, with a sigh, closed his book. He said he hated World History. Then Ted undressed and did his bathroom duties. “Turn out the light,” he said after he’d returned and slipped beneath the covers.

Burt listened to Ted squirm himself into a comfortable position. In a few minutes, the sound of easy breathing told Burt his brother had escaped from World History and drifted off to sleep.

Instantly, as if it had been waiting, an unseen eagle, speaking in its croaking voice, said, “The garden weasel, Burt.”

Burt knew what a garden weasel was. He could picture, in his mother’s gardening basket, the hand tool she scratched packed dirt with. It had three claws, and if it were placed beside the fuel-tank body it could complete the eagle totem.

Burt lay still and listened to the bedtime noises his parents made. He heard his father lock the front door and the back. He listened while his mother run water in the bathroom. Their noises died away. The house grew quiet, and in the silent night Burt crept downstairs to the back porch. He rummaged in the dark through his mother’s gardening basket. A point on one of the garden weasel’s tines pricked his finger. After he had licked the blood away, he carefully pulled her wood-handled tool from the basket’s bed of clutter and hid it in the pocket of his jacket, which hung on its assigned hook on the rack beside the kitchen door. He flew upstairs light-footed back to

bed. He’d get the garden tool to the woman’s house. He would find a way to do that. His gift would complete the sculpture. The eagle would be whole, and he would be exonerated. He would have paid his debt. Satisfaction, as thick as delirium, made him squirm, and he was almost giddy before he finally fell asleep.

At school the next day, Miss Laughlin sent a note to Mr. Takamoto, his geometry teacher. “Send Burt to the office,” the note said. Mr. Takamoto put the note on Burt’s desk and tapped the back of his head, a signal he was to go at once.

“I wonder if you’d like to explain that dead bird, Burt,” Miss Laughlin voiced her remark as a question. She didn’t make it an accusation, but what she said let Burt know she knew.

“You mean the one in Lacey’s locker, Miss Laughlin?” Burt kept his tone respectful.

Miss Laughlin sighed. She glanced down at her hands, clamped together on her desk. “I’m only interested in the truth, Burt. Can we agree on that?”

He was afraid that if he spoke his voice would break. She would take that as a sign he was untruthful.

“What I’m saying to you now is take the time to set the record straight. There will be consequences, Burt, but not any you can’t stand.”

Burt kept his gaze steady and fixed on the principal. “I’m not lying, Miss Laughlin.” Through the closed door, he could hear the office girls chattering. The noise came as if he were imprisoned in a cell.

Miss Laughlin tilted back her head to take a deep breath. When she spoke again, she put an edge in her voice. “I cannot imagine the kind of boy who would drag a filthy eagle into school and lie about that. How cowardly, Burt.”

The word *cowardly* wounded. He hadn’t foreseen it. He wanted to defend himself but he didn’t have an answer ready. His thoughts ran wild. Miss Laughlin abruptly rose. “I’m asking you to leave school, Burt. I’m asking you to go home and think this situation through. When you come back, you can tell me if you think lying about that eagle is worth losing your school privileges. Is it worth not graduating? Think about that.” She opened her door and pointed the way Burt had to follow out.

As soon as he had pulled his jacket on and stepped outdoors, he heard Judd, Lacey’s boyfriend, yell, “Hey, asshole.” The bulky champion of the insulted girl pounded forward past the flagpole. His fists were doubled. He had raised his arms.

Burt pulled the garden weasel from his pocket. He brandished it—a claw, a razor, a talon—and ran a dozen steps toward the charging Judd. A squealed screech stopped him. Two eagles divebombed. They swiped their curved, sharp talons across Judd’s head. Blood sprang from the roots of his blond hair. He screamed.

Burt turned to run beneath the rising eagles. He raised his own arms. He waved the claw-shaped weapon. “Take me! . . . Take me,” he shouted to the majestic birds.

---

Robert Kinerk, who has written stories since fourth grade, grew up in Alaska and has worked as a reporter in Alaska and New Hampshire. He and his wife, Anne, now make their home in Cambridge, Mass., where he is a co-editor of *Harvest*, the literary magazine for the Harvard Institute for Learning in Retirement.



goldenshrimp

# Blades of Bliss

ALANA VISSER

Minora, minora  
Magnum, slash  
Safely, safely  
Hidden stash

In her mind  
Molding into form  
A slash of beauty,  
A beauty scorned  
Undefined groundless gravel  
Chafing and forming the process of shovel

Truth, beauty, freedom,  
Lies.  
Beneath her steady bridge of cries  
But the wind blows  
And covers with pebbles  
That which she wishes to remain unraveled  
As it seems unthought-of to move this mountain of stone,  
We cover it with a rippled blanket

Minora, minora  
Magnum, slash  
Safely, safely  
Hidden stash

In her mind  
Molding a beauty pure  
A beauty disturbing  
A beauty secure

Alana Visser was born and raised in South Africa. She developed a great passion for writing poetry from a very young age. She won her first literary prize in a national poetry competition where she earned third place in the country. Her poem was then published and featured in the *Bliksoldaatjie*, poetry publication for young poets. After earning her Bachelor's Degree in Communications, she now enjoys a career working as a content writer for an international company, writing articles and content for client websites worldwide.



## Silent Symphony

ALANA VISSER

Death-metal is violin  
Where truth meets lie,  
Filling this void  
With a soundless sigh

Truth be told,  
It could not fold  
Into the cabinet of dust and cold

And though she speaks of linen as white,  
Color can only be so pure

For what comes after fascination?  
Could it be passion?  
Or might it be obsession?

# Insanity

ALANA VISSER

Midnight mourning  
Night terror dawning  
Sanity imploding  
Into mental mayhem transforming

Core yearning  
Darkness submerging

Once sadness  
Now gladness  
Ill-defined route of madness

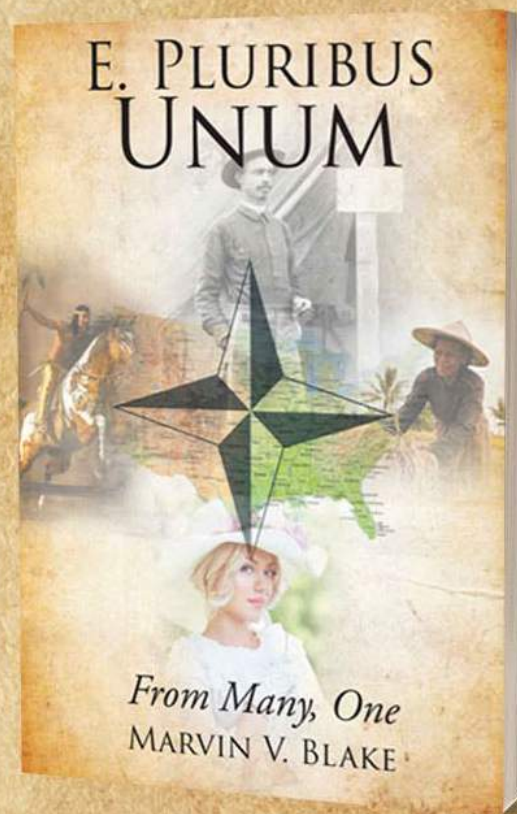


goldenshrimp

# E. PLURIBUS UNUM

*From Many, One*

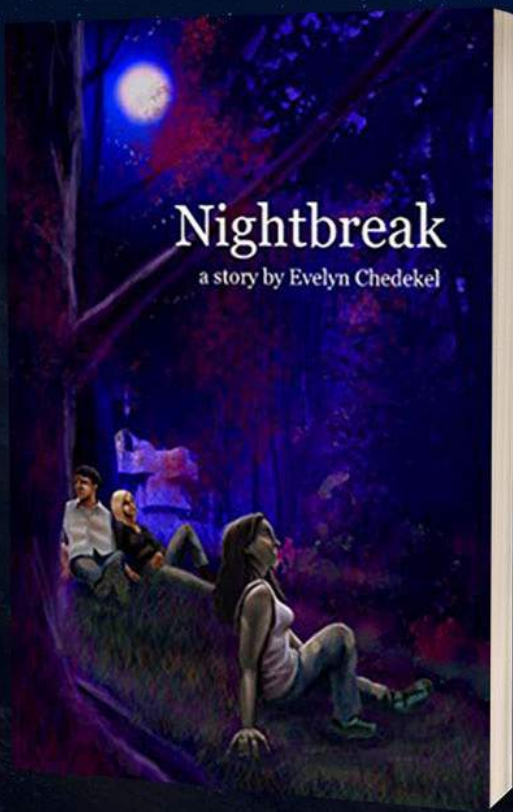
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# Nightbreak

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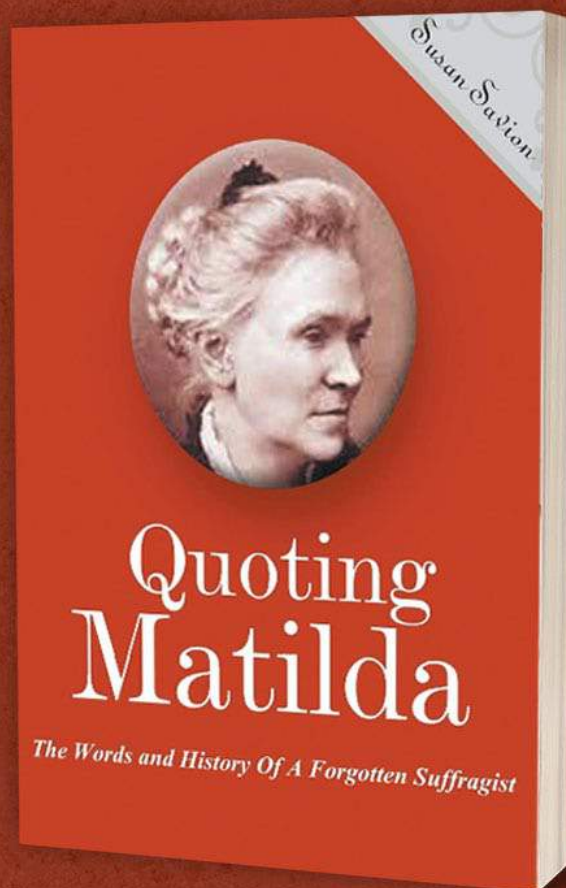
## Quoting Matilda

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# A Mind of Winter: Notes on Exile

REBECCA RUTH GOULD

“My country cannot be found,” the narrator announces in “Dancing in Odessa,” a poem that belongs to the same-named collection by Russian-born American poet Ilya Kaminsky, published in 2004. “All that is musical in us is memory,” we read a few poems later, this time conjuring his mother’s voice. For Kaminsky, language conjures memory, and memory creates a country for the exiled and otherwise displaced. In “Travelling Musicians,” the penultimate section of the collection, we encounter a prose sketch of a certain Paul Celan. This Paul Celan, a figure of the poet’s imagination, sits on a rooftop, searching for Venus “reciting Brodsky to himself.” This figure, the Paul Celan of the poet’s imagination, not of history, wonders whether “his past existed at all.” In reciting Brodsky, a Russian poet who began to write poetry decades after the death of the historical Celan, the Celan of Kaminsky’s poem discovers his vocation. The figures who populate Kaminsky’s poems are displaced from history in the same way that Kaminsky is displaced from the land of his birth.

The country of the poet’s language is wide. It is as broad as the sky itself. Yet, it has no territory. “I was born in the city named after Odysseus / and I praise no nation,” says the poet in the concluding poem. *All of Dancing in Odessa* is about dancing, and wandering. The poet’s muse is Mnemosyne, wife of Zeus, who gave birth to the nine muses. Her maternity is proof of the productive role of memory in shaping our selves. Like many of the greatest American poets, Kaminsky is an immigrant, and a refugee. He finds his country in language. That language, an English that incorporates many features of Russian as well as fragments from world poetry, reconciles him to his distance from the Odessa of his birth.

Being an immigrant is defeating and demeaning. Everything you thought you knew you have to learn all over again, as every immigrant knows. But watching the poet reconstruct his country in words is a consolation to all of us severed from the lands of our birth. To be estranged from our countries is to be estranged from our selves. To remember is to

refashion our selves. While Kaminsky dwells on scenes from his childhood to construct a new country from language, other writers exiled from their homeland have built their countries from other poems, other figures of speech, and other ways of inhabiting the planet. This essay is about the strategies that I, along with my fellow wanderers, have devised to create a mobile home for myself as I traverse the globe.

In 2011, around the time of the Arab Spring, it became apparent to me that I would never return home to the land of my birth. I would return to visit certainly, but not to live. Since I never managed to create a home for myself in the United States, the country of my birth, this did not strike me as a great tragedy. I began to understand that I would never return while observing the beginning of the Arab Spring. I had just left Syria in order to take up a fellowship in Berlin. Having begun my life as a peripatetic academic who will move anywhere in the world for a reasonable job, I watched from my apartment perched high above Berlin’s Tiergarten as Egyptians toppled the Mubarak dynasty, ushering in a new historical era. At that time, many places in the world seemed to offer hope for a better life. The United States was not one of them. I was beginning a career as an academic, and most jobs were abroad. I didn’t mind: I had never felt at home in the country of my birth. I had never felt American. I was eager to see the world.

See the world I did. My year in Berlin was followed by a year in Bethlehem. This was followed by a year in Singapore and then in Budapest. Each of these sojourns shaped me in a different way. Berlin gave birth to poetry, but only a decade later. Living in Bethlehem, amid the Israeli occupation, gave birth to a political consciousness in connection with Palestine which landed me in the crosshairs of a major political conflict in the UK six years later. Singapore was perhaps the least inspiring and most monochromatic of my various transient habitations, but my experience of designing a world literature curriculum at Yale-NUS College in 2014 enabled me to see the migrations of the texts I love in new ways. I still follow the peripatetic trajectories of my best students from that year, including a brilliant reader of Baudelaire who now works in a museum in Japan, and a lover of Walter Benjamin who is pursuing his PhD in physics at Harvard.

The most permanent migration of my adult life was to London, to a country that has become the closest to what I might call home, and from where I write these notes now. Throughout these migratory years, my homeland gradually receded from view. I applied for jobs in the United States—I applied for jobs everywhere—but every year I did so with waning enthusiasm, a part of me hoping for automatic rejection by the country of my birth. Gradually, I came to feel more at home in Europe than America.

My adult migrations were preceded by coerced

migrations during my childhood. These were even more disruptive of my emotional attachments and my sense of belonging: from Illinois, where I was born, I moved to New Orleans, Florida, Washington DC, Costa Rica, and Oaxaca, Mexico, all before I became a teenager. I did not speak Spanish, but I learned quickly to pretend.

“Were your parents in the military?” I was asked whenever I recounted the migratory pathways of my childhood. Being a child migrant stood in need of explanation to others. For me it was simply the architecture of my existence. Once we finally settled down in California, I became a chronic teenage runaway, to the terror of my parents. I was unable to imagine any other way of being. Perhaps, my migratory childhood had made me restless and impatient. I had grown used to being always on the run. By the age of forty, I had long become acclimated to a life of exile.

Exile is an aberrant experience for many, but it is commonplace in my line of work, just as it was a taken-for-granted aspect of my childhood. In the world I inhabit, exile is a norm. It might be posited that all modernist literature is exilic in one way or another. American modernism was forged in Paris before and after the First World War. Arabic modernism was born during these same years in New York City, among poets who had migrated there from the Levant. Iranian modernism is unthinkable without the combined influences of Tbilisi and Istanbul, London and Berlin.

Like many who survive off the fruits of their intellects, academics do not get to choose their homes. Trying to find work in the land of one’s birth may mean unemployment. Nonetheless, some academics restrict the location for their job search in order to remain close to their family. I am not one of these. The one time I applied for a position near my immediate family, in Oregon, I came to regret it. I was shortlisted, and so had to undergo the agony of witnessing my mother’s disappointment when the position was not offered to me. That was the last time I shared details about my job search with my family: I could not bear to let them down.

Throughout my migratory existence, a small number of poets and critics have become my perpetual companions. Edward Said has been prominent among this constellation of influences. I encountered his landmark essay “Reflections on Exile” (1984) in his collection of the same name while a PhD student at the CUNY Graduate Center in New York, before I began the adult phase of my migratory existence. Every time I read the essay, it provides a new justification for my life choices, as well as an anatomy of my existential compulsion to migrate.

Amid my many exiles, I have consoled myself that my distance from my homeland has liberated me emotionally and spiritually from the prejudices of the land of my birth. I used

to remind myself that there were only two things I truly loved about America: rock music and African-American literature. As for the rest—hotdogs, genetically modified produce, SUVs, radical income inequality, the death penalty, chronic violence and the right to bear arms—none of these increased my happiness or enlightenment. America was—and is—too complacent in regards to its own prejudices, too ignorant of the outside world for my taste. Geographically too vast, intellectually it is too small. Such negative thoughts helped to quell my spiritual homelessness as I roamed countries and continents, in search of a home.

I was recently brought to reflect on my experience of being an exile through observing the impact of exilic existence on a friend who had recently migrated to the UK. As he told me, he was alienated from his past self yet unable to find himself in his new environment. He was compelled to create in a language not his own, even while the potential of his native language remained untapped. Edward Said diagnosed this state of being well. “For most exiles,” Said writes, “the difficulty consists not simply in being forced to live away from home, but rather...in living with the many reminders that you are in exile...and that the normal traffic of everyday contemporary life keeps you in tantalizing and unfulfilled touch with the old place.” In the contemporary world, being in exile is less like being banished to a foreign land than it is perpetually existing on a threshold, neither wholly at home in the new culture nor wholly severed from the old one.

My friend despaired of his ability to create amid such estrangement, or even to be himself. The person who he was, he worried, had been left behind in his homeland. He could not find or make a new self in this temporary space. I tried to persuade him that his condition was less aberrant than he thought. In my world, and in the history of the literatures that have formed me, the condition of the exilic writer is the norm, not the exception. The artist’s relationship to reality is paradigmatically that of the exile, a point already intuited in the twelfth century by the monk Hugh of Saint-Victor, in his *Didascalicon*, an encyclopaedic handbook that was used to instruct students in the sciences of rhetoric, philosophy, and exegesis. In words famously reinterpreted by Edward Said in his 1984 essay on exile, Hugo discusses exile as a metaphor for the ascetic’s quest for spiritual enlightenment. “The man who finds his homeland sweet is still a tender beginner,” he writes. At the next level, “he to whom every soil is as his native one is already strong.” For the perfect seeker of truth, “the entire world is as a foreign land.” Hugo explains these different levels of enlightenment according to the same tripartite schema: “The tender soul has fixed his love on one spot in the world; the strong man has extended his love to all places; the perfect man has extinguished his.”

My friend suggested that my background as an American led me to approach the question of exile differently than him. The celebration of rootlessness, and of indifference to the world that lies at the heart of Hugh of Saint-Victor's typology of exile eluded him, not only because his relationship to his home country was different from my own. Also different was his country's relationship to the world, and the world's relationship to that country.

The ideal of alienation from one's native soil is reflected in a text cited by Said at the end of his essay: Wallace Stevens' "The Snow Man" (1921). In this enigmatic poem, which is not explicitly about exile but becomes in Said's reading an allegory of the exilic condition, Stevens calls on viewers to stop anthropomorphizing objects in the natural world, to cease expecting the outside world to reflect our inner turmoil, and to behold the serene indifference of the snow as a kind of miracle. Whereas an earlier generation of Romantic poets and readers projected their misery onto the "sound of the wind, / In the sound of a few leaves" when they gazed on a wintry landscape, Stevens proposes a different way of seeing, of listening, and of being. The poem concludes with a paradox that also articulates the strange position of the exile:

For the listener, who listens in the snow,  
And, nothing himself, beholds  
Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.

Said brilliantly discerned in these words a modality of experience specific to exile. He turns Stevens' poem into a template for the exilic imagination. Like a passer-by listening to the crunch of the snow who, instead of projecting his emotions onto the wintry landscape, beholds the "nothing that is not there and the nothing that is," migrants learn to view the world from a distance. Exile has taught me that this distance, while sometimes painful and always disorienting, confers unique advantages on the viewer.

Following the example of Edward Said, the mind of winter is a state of being, not unlike Gramsci's "optimism of the will; pessimism of the intellect" that enabled him to gaze on the world's tragedies without despair from his prison cell. Stevens' snow man is as alien to the world as the "gold-feathered bird" who dangles down from the "palm at the end of the mind" in "Of Mere Being" (1967). Like the snowman, the bird is serenely indifferent to the world and its woes, and that indifference is what makes it sublime. The bird's ability to sing "without human meaning, / Without human feeling, a foreign song" is a kind of reverie of the exilic imagination.

The exile who is forcibly severed from her homeland is plagued by her lack of agency in the shaping of her destiny. She did not expect to die in a foreign land, yet that is what

life has in store for her. For such creatures of fate, the ability to acquire a mind of winter is a supreme—if bittersweet—assertion of the will. And the ability to articulate this state of being is the purest vindication of the language of exile, which is the language of home viewed from a distance, inverted, and made alien to one's self. One might argue that, in this estranged guise, the language of home becomes more beautiful in exile. In *The Book of Disquiet*, Fernando Pessoa famously described his only "nation," as the Portuguese language. "This is the only kind of nationalism worth having," my friend said when I shared Pessoa's words with him. And yet Portuguese for Pessoa was a portable home, that could be shaped and reshaped from anywhere on earth.

Alienation from the self is exactly the condition of being captured in "The Snow Man." In the poem, we first encounter a vision that is cold and apparently indifferent to the many layers of suffering that the poet evokes. The snow man—or the passer-by who feels like a snow man—beholds "the junipers shagged with ice" and "the spruces rough in the distant glitter," and yet feels numb. Such is the state of the migrant, who acquires a mind of winter. On one level, this mind is characterized by indifference; viewed from another angle, the indifference is simply a sign of fortitude. On a superficial level, the exile does not "think / Of any misery in the sound of the wind." On a deeper level, the exile's entire life is circumscribed by this misery, and the only reason why he does not think about it is that it is everywhere, a perpetual staccato to his everyday existence, as taken for granted as breathing. In the condition of exile, Said notes, "the pathos of summer and autumn as much as the potential of spring are nearby but unobtainable." The migrant must cultivate a mind of winter in order to move from place to place, in order to say goodbye without being immobilized with regret, and in pursuit of something bigger and more permanent than our earthly existence, without giving into despair.

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Rebecca Ruth Gould is the author of the poetry collection *Cityscapes* (2019) and the award-winning monograph *Writers & Rebels* (2016). She has translated many books from Persian and Georgian, including *After Tomorrow the Days Disappear* (2016), *The Death of Bagrat Zakharych and other Stories* (2019), and *High Tide of the Eyes* (2019). A Pushcart Prize nominee, she was a finalist for the Luminaire Award for Best Poetry (2017) and for Lunch Ticket's Gabo Prize (2017).

# Purple People: on Seeing Color

IRA MEIER

If you don't see color you can't tell what red and blue lights mean when they cross your dashboard

You wouldn't know to warn your daughters that the thin blue line divides suburban houses at the same rate that it breaks skulls on the other side of town.

*You couldn't teach them the fear in our generations belly that still lingers when we see white hoods*

Racism isn't monochrome, genocide is Technicolor  
When I learned to fear the police I learned to see color

When you are brought up white, the idea of seeing color seems ugly

Genocide is Technicolor.

If we only see gray we can ignore why it isn't tapping on our son's bedrooms

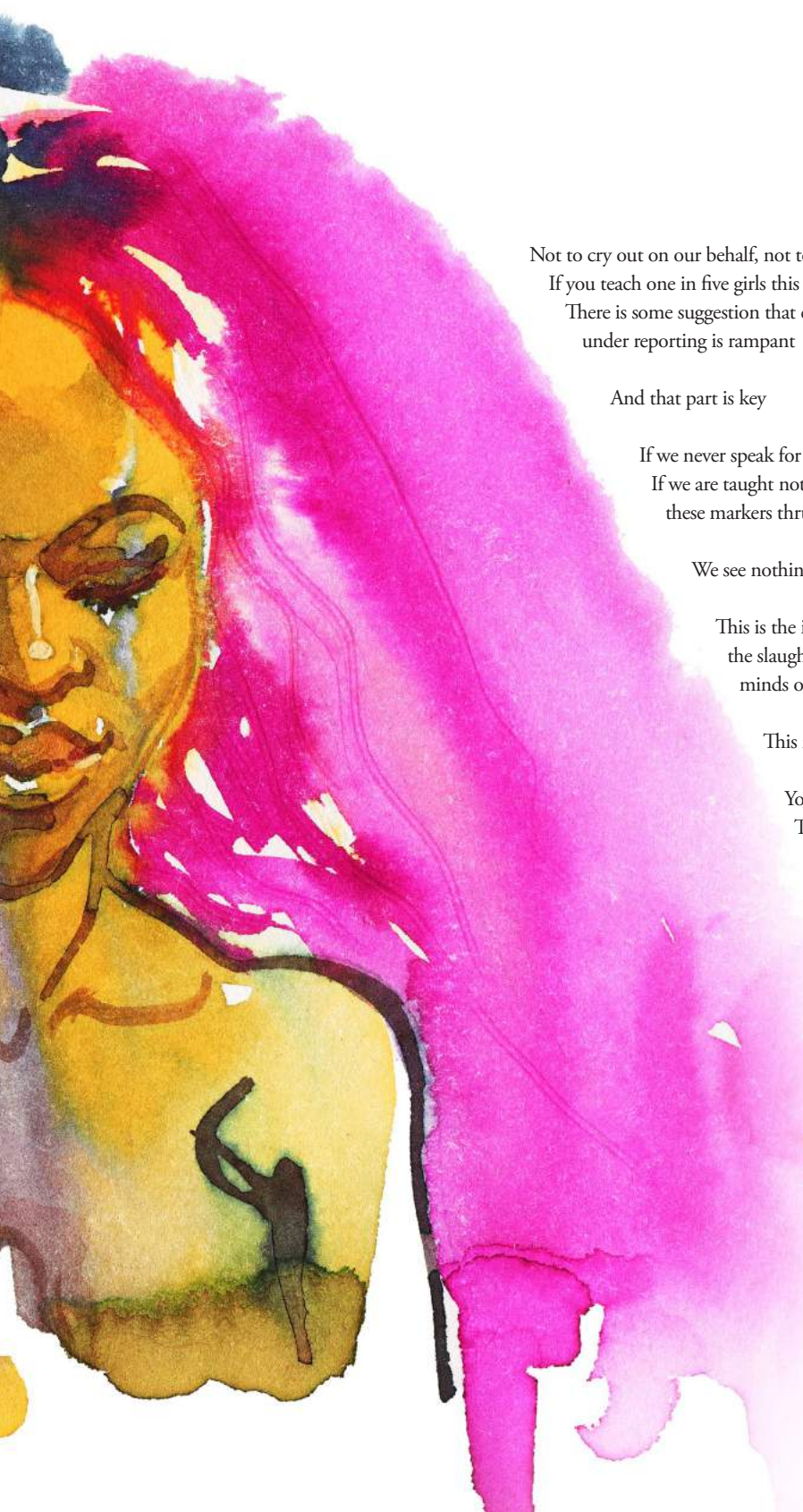
The first and primary violence that white supremacy requires to function is the violence of the so-called "white family"

The mythical "Jones"

The "Smiths"

In order to maintain the cold detachment from our neighbor's pain we must first learn to not to feel our own pain





Not to cry out on our behalf, not to beg for our own flesh

If you teach one in five girls this before they hit puberty you don't have to teach every single one  
There is some suggestion that childhood sexual assault rates may be higher or lower, but the  
under reporting is rampant

And that part is key

If we never speak for our selves, it is laughable that we would speak out for each other  
If we are taught not even to see our pain as pain, not even to see cruelty as tied to  
these markers thrust upon us

We see nothing

This is the intersection between how white supremacy maintains itself on  
the slaughter of black and brown bodies and how it maintains itself in the  
minds of its perpetrators

This is how you make evil people

You mute their feeling, cap their capacity to speak freely, to feel freely  
They forget how to see  
How to hear  
How to find the rhythms of kindness and cruelty

Until all that is human has

D I S A P P E A R E D

Ira Meier is a 26-year-old poet and comic artist living in Los Angeles. They were raised in the northern suburbs of Chicago and went to college at DePaul university. Their work focuses on trauma, leftist thought, and the transformative possibility.

# Cigarette as Breath

IRA MEIER

Inhale exhale  
This early sobriety mindfulness  
Is the cornerstone of stinky meditation-  
Disgusting grace

I like bitter tastes.  
I heard this is a challenge, but it comes naturally to my palate.  
Vinegar, arugula, rosemary  
I am more comfortable feeling uncomfortable.  
This is a challenging quality in a patient.

Resilience is a word I hear professionals use to describe me a lot.  
They compliment me now at 3 years sober on how steady my slow crawl is  
Like ivy corroding brick- life chips away and between the edges of facades.

Resilience doesn't feel how you picture grace feeling.  
When I think of grace, I think of white gloves ladies.  
Smooth "a" affect under pressure

Resilience doesn't wear white gloves.  
Resilience has bloody bitten down stumps for fingers  
The nails peeling off from digging into the floor, trying to hold on  
Resilience grimaces

I try to let my breath pool in my chest,  
But it doesn't feel like breath—it feels like liquid fire.  
I absorb the shock for a moment, pull more fire in,  
Try to cool it in the cavity of my anxieties  
And release it hotter than before.

Resilience is the opposite of grace  
To be strong like a woman in America means to put bandages and white  
gloves over your stumps  
Grace is the measure of how little pink seepage permeates

I hold my hands in my pockets,  
smile something between a grimace and a smirk.  
As I try to accept the *compliment*.



cincinart



cincinart

# What's Normal for the Fly Starves the Spider

IRA MEIER

If you don't see it, it isn't happening  
And if it happens every day, it really isn't happening.

If you start dropping bombs from a video game  
Before children are born  
Then it isn't happening for them  
The way it was in 2007  
When we said that people were crazy to be afraid of spiders.

And if you run out of things to feed the spider that don't matter-  
Some sins become less deadly.  
Our pet needs to be fed.

And we can watch him grow stronger.  
And we can watch him take over the kitchen.  
And we can watch him spill out across the living room.  
Until we are trapped in the corner of our home.

Unable to move without getting caught in the sparkling perfect lines-  
That we swore were too beautiful, too essential to our marriage to destroy.

And we can stare at all the tiny bodies that we first murdered, hardly  
visible from so far away.  
So sanitary, such a forgivable sin  
While our children's rotting eyes regard us from the couch.

Because starvation for the spider is what was good for the fly,  
And we mustn't let such a natural order die

Literary Work

# Judgment Call

ALEX WOOD

Ivan Zamurovic

Morgan supposed it was fate that her MetroCard had expired just before her last day of work. Having bumped into the turnstile and irritating the impatient people behind her, she now stood slumped in front of the machine, shoving her card into the slit and spending money she didn't have. Of course she had told her friends that she would be using her newfound free time to get out a bit—to go to the museum exhibit that everyone was gushing about, to check out the pop up shop that was inexplicably in Midtown, or to take that bestseller she'd been meaning to read to Central Park. All would be great reasons to use the subway. Morgan knew that in reality, the next few weeks would be spent horizontally, whether on her bed, floor, or couch.

That was, of course, if today really was her last day. Morgan's declaration that she would be quitting had been met with eye rolls and mutterings from her friends. This was not the first time that she had made such claims. Her friends had taken to betting on whether or not she would ever leave the call center. The pay was bad, but passable, and the hours were agreeable with her preference for spending time horizontally, whether on her bed, floor, or couch.

A train arrived at the station as Morgan waited for the machine to spit her MetroCard back out. She had to rush through the turnstile and didn't have the luxury of heading down to her preferred train car. On the few mornings that Morgan beat the train to the station, she would head to the end of the platform. That would position her right where the station exit would be so she could dart out and not be stuck behind a large crowd. This was the kind of small victory that she needed to get through the day.

But not after today. No more commutes, no more pointless tasks, and best of all, no more Julian. Morgan told herself that being stuck in the crowd might steel her—she could channel that bubbling frustration and turn it into the resolve she needed to tell Craig that she was done.

The building lobby was always a hassle. Morgan rolled her eyes at the sight of the security guards. They saw her every day, yet they still required that she flash them her ID badge. The card had an irritating habit of ending up at the bottom of her purse. After some rummaging, she presented the badge with her middle finger as she passed the desk.

The call center was located on the 25th floor of the building. Given the location of the building, Morgan assumed that an office on the 25th floor would have a great view of the city, if it had windows. The call center was designed like a casino—no windows or clocks to distract people from the task at hand. Instead, the walls were plastered with blown up copies of the script that all the employees were forced to memorize. New hires were easily identified by the way they would pretend to stand up and stretch, trying to get a glimpse of what they should say next. Given the high turnaround in the office, this was a very common occurrence.

Morgan slid into her cubicle. She only had a couple of trinkets on the desk. A three-legged pig and a photo from her sister's wedding. She wouldn't even need a box to carry her belongings out. Her cubicle would easily look as barren as the one to her left.

That's not to say that no one worked out of the cubicle to her left. Perhaps three times a day, Julian would return to his assigned seat. Morgan hadn't even known that they sat next to each other until her third day. Julian was by far the company's top salesman, though he wasn't the typical hotshot who talked a big game. He wasn't the type of salesman that hit on Morgan and her friends out on the weekends. Sometimes, Morgan thought that she might have preferred it if he were that kind of irritating. That would make sense.

To be at his best, Julian had made it clear to management that he needed to be active during the day. Management initially thought that Julian might not have been a great fit, given what working at a call center entails. He preferred to pace around the office and use a wireless headset to make calls. However, they

were quick to eat their words once Julian began selling printer ink like no one had before. Craig had even offered to bend the dress code and allow Julian to wear athletic attire, but Julian refused and stuck to his slacks and loafers.

No one in the office knew how he did it. Julian was soft-spoken and flitted back and forth so quickly that none of the other employees could catch enough of what he was saying to customers. The few coworkers that Morgan tolerated enough to speak with in the cramped kitchen often joked that he must be blackmailing people into buying ink.

Most people in the office paid little attention to Julian. The only facts that any of them seemed to know about him were that he still lived with his mother and that he didn't own a cell phone. They found his antics somewhat amusing. They would shout out to Julian, telling him that his constant walking was helping him keep the weight off. Julian, who was stick-thin, never responded to the playful comments.

Morgan seemed to be the only one who could not stand Julian. She had originally taken the position at the call center because she didn't think anyone could be good at selling printer ink and toner. College had been four years of constant competition and Morgan thought that spending some time in a less stressful environment would benefit her as she adjusted to adult life. The constant reminders of Julian's success had instead done the opposite and compounded her misery.

Being positioned next to his cubicle did not mean that she saw him more than the other staff, but Julian always seemed to pop up exactly when Morgan was having issues with her computer. To be fair to Julian, Morgan also had issues with her computer when he wasn't around too. He was never confrontational, but when he saw that Morgan was struggling, Julian would mutter instructions, as if talking to himself. Morgan had looked up the first couple times it happened, foolishly expecting eye contact or any sort of recognition. She would have preferred something, anything direct—even snide comments about her lack of computer skills would have been welcomed. Julian's whispered suggestions were always right.

Morgan looked over at the manager's office. It was empty. Craig had a habit of showing up late on Fridays, so Morgan's moment would have to wait. She turned to her computer. Morgan supposed she would make a few calls. Most people treated the Craig-free mornings as an opportunity to sit and chat, but Morgan was too antsy about quitting. She moved to pull up her list of calls for the day, but nothing happened on the monitor.

"You have to hold control and click."

Morgan turned around, but Julian had already glided away. She followed his instructions and sure enough, her list appeared. Morgan glared over at Julian. He was shuffling back and forth, the sight of his fast-moving lips the only evidence that he was already mid-conversation on another call.

A thought struck Morgan. In all her time at the printer ink company, she had never heard Julian on the phone. If today was to truly be her last day, this would be her final opportunity to find out how he managed to sell so much printer ink.

Checking to make sure that Julian was looking the other way, Morgan pushed her chair over to his cubicle. She reached for his phone's receiver and put it to her ear.

"I can't thank you enough," Julian whispered into his headset.

"Let me know when you have the money, and I'll deliver everything right to you," the gruff voice on the other end said. Morgan frowned. It sounded as if Julian was buying something, not selling. And whatever it was certainly could not be printer ink.

"No, no. We can meet somewhere neutral." Julian was speaking quickly now. Morgan listened as he and the man on the other end agreed to meet in a Manhattan park. Julian ended the conversation abruptly.

Morgan quickly rolled back to her desk. Julian returned to his cubicle to look at his list, dial a number, and head back out onto the floor.

Morgan did not pack up her two things, nor did she speak to Craig when he bounced into the office in the afternoon. She did her calls as normal. She grabbed her bag and jacket at five and sped out of the office, quickly muttering the necessary goodbyes.

Julian's early morning phone call held all of her attention. Tomorrow morning, he would be meeting with some mysterious man to receive something. And while Julian always did things quietly, it was apparent that he wanted this done *quietly*.

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To take her mind off the day's events, Morgan grudgingly agreed to meet her friends out for a drink. Her idea of a drink was a nice glass of wine, while their idea of a drink was actually several drinks and an inability to recount anything the next morning. She forced herself to go as it was another reason to use that fresh MetroCard.

At the cramped bar on the Lower East Side, Morgan held her wine glass close to her body as people jumped and danced around her. Morgan's friends had learned not to ask her about work at the call center, lest they want to hear a long and angry, yet very dull tirade.

"Whatcha thinking about?" A young man stumbled toward her. If you were to tell Morgan that this is what a company's top salesman looked like, she would believe it. His striped button-down was not very button-downed by this point in the night.

"You know most guys would see that look on your face and tell you to smile, but I can tell you're thinking about something. So what's on your mind?"

It was a terrible line. But seeing as her friends were off doing whatever in the corner, Morgan decided to bite.

"This guy from work."

"Ah, the classic HR nightmare," the guy said knowingly. "Well hey, if you don't want to disrupt your whole office, I'm here."

Shortly after that, Morgan was hailing a cab to take herself home.

Morgan's friends did not expect to hear from her until late in the afternoon on weekends, if at all. They knew she preferred to spend her days off horizontally, whether on her bed, floor, or couch. Delaney was therefore thrilled when she received Morgan's text asking if she'd like to go for a walk in the park the next morning. They both had dark sunglasses on—Delaney to hide her hungover eyes from the sun and Morgan to seem inconspicuous. Delaney had to catch Morgan up on everything she missed by going home "early" (just after 1:00AM). She recounted how Christie had gotten them thrown out of the bar and what a gentleman the man who took her home (it turned out to be the same guy who had hit on Morgan) had been when he didn't kick her out immediately in the morning.

Morgan nodded along as she found them a bench in the middle of the park with a good view of their surroundings. They sat and Delaney continued to babble. Julian was always on time for everything, so surely any second now...

Morgan saw him. She'd recognize that walk anywhere. He moved down one of the paths at the same speed with which he swept through the office. Julian kept looking around. Morgan pressed her glasses closer to her face. She hoped that this would not be the first time that she and Julian made eye contact.

To her delight, Julian took a seat on a bench almost exactly opposite them. A few moments later he was joined by a burly man. In keeping with Julian's tradition, the two did not look at each other. Morgan watched as their lips made tiny movements. The interaction only lasted a few moments. The burly man got up and walked back the way he came. From behind her glasses, Morgan noticed that he had left behind a rolled up brown paper bag. Julian clutched the bag close to his body and then quickly slipped it under his jacket.

Delaney threw her phone in front of Morgan's eyes. She wanted her to proofread the text that she was going to send to the guy from the night before. *Or should she even send a text at all? Should she wait and see if he reaches out first?* Morgan pushed the phone out of her field of view, but Julian had already vanished.

It had to be drugs. That had been Morgan's first assumption when she had listened in on the phone call, though she had doubted herself. Julian seemed so content working as a telemarketer. Sure he was unusual, but it didn't fit. Though, as Morgan thought more about it, maybe it did. Julian had an energy and work ethic that no one else in the office could match. Maybe he wouldn't make eye contact with anyone because if they looked into his eyes, they might notice dilated pupils, or see that he was not completely there.

These thoughts stayed with Morgan throughout the weekend. The idea twisted in her mind, which was silly. This was just a job to pay the bills while she figured out her priorities. She had chosen telemarketing because she felt that the nature of the job meant that she would not have to interact much with the other employees, and would therefore not become overly invested in any potential workplace drama. Why was it her business what Julian may or may not consume? Sure, he made the call on company time, but doing personal things at work was a crime of which everyone in that office was guilty. In a way, it almost made her feel vindicated. To be blown out of the water by the sales of someone so unassuming with no apparent advantages over her had hurt her already wounded ego. But, as it turned out, he was the Lance Armstrong of telemarketing!

The image of Craig's face after being told that his star employee was addicted to drugs popped into Morgan's mind. And it stayed there. She had always been repulsed by Craig, a man whose head was much too small for his body, yet she never enjoyed watching him put a congratulatory arm around Julian when announcing the sales numbers for each month.

Monday morning arrived, and so did Morgan, very early at the subway station. She was the first in the last car, and therefore the first one up the steps. Her ID badge was already in hand as she swept through the lobby.

Morgan had never been the first one in the office before. She tapped her feet in anticipation. She didn't have to wait long for the door to open again.

"Morning, Julian." There had never been a point in engaging Julian in small talk before. "How are you feeling today?" Julian quickly put on his headset and whisked away.

The rest of the office began to file in. Morgan had never been happier to see any of these people. She greeted as many of her coworkers as she could. This out-of-the-ordinary behavior was greeted with a few frowns, but no one thought about it for long. Everyone assumed their positions and the workday began.

Morgan could not concentrate on the work she never concentrated on anyway. She kept playing with her hair, making the ends stick up in odd ways. Her eyes frequently flitted to the door for the entire hour it took before Craig lumbered into the office. Upon hearing his heavy footsteps, Morgan shot out of her seat. She moved to intercept him before he went into his office, but the door was practically slammed in her face. The only time Craig moved quickly was when he wanted to avoid his employees and retreat into the privacy of his office.

Morgan grasped the door handle, but paused. Sure, she could go in there now and tell Craig everything. He would then naturally call Julian in as well to discuss the accusations. Through some loophole, the company had somehow managed to avoid having an HR department, so all discretion was up to Craig. But in this moment, Morgan didn't want discretion. She hadn't felt this passionate about anything in ages. Julian, who avoided confrontation at all costs, would have to have his secrets exposed in front of everyone.

Morgan moved from the door to the water cooler. That would be the best place to catch Craig. He seemed to have an unnatural fear of being dehydrated, so he made frequent trips to ensure that his large bottle was filled

to the brim. Morgan rested her arm on the machine and surveyed the office. There wasn't much to see of course, save for Julian weaving between the other employees hunched over their desks.

The door to Craig's office clicked. He waddled out, water bottle in hand. He didn't say anything to her, but gave Morgan a forced smile as he stooped to use the water cooler. Morgan figured he was probably debating whether or not he remembered her name. Due to the high turnover, Craig avoided learning people's names by using nicknames like "buddy" or "pal" or "big guy." Being one of the longest-tenured employees, Morgan found herself slightly irked at the lack of a personalized greeting, but she figured that it meant she had succeeded in her goal of not standing out.

Water slowly dripped from the cooler into Craig's bottle. Morgan turned again to the office.

"I have an announcement." All of the heads perked up. The only person who did not seem affected was Julian, who continued to circulate the office.

"Now, I know that we're such a close-knit family here, and that we truly care about one another," Morgan continued. She thought the lying was a nice, dramatic effect. "Which is why I feel that it is my duty to share some information I recently discovered about one of us, one of our family members, that was very disheartening to hear."

Craig's large water bottle was overflowing. A couple unattended phone lines rang continuously. Julian still paid no notice to the fact that every other employee was focused on the scene at the front of the office.

"It's with a heavy heart that I reveal that someone in this office has been using the line to make personal phone calls." There were a few disappointed groans from the crowd. They hadn't been expecting much, but doing personal stuff on the clock was not news. Morgan tugged at her hair again. She could sense that she was losing her audience.

"These are not just any calls. Someone among us is using the office phone to buy what I can only assume are illegal drugs," she said. Morgan finally got the reaction she was looking for. There were gasps and loud mutterings. Craig's water bottle slipped to the floor and spilt everywhere.

Craig turned to Morgan. "That's a very serious accusation, Monica. I'd like to believe that none of my staff would do something so—"

"And the person who made those calls," Morgan continued, her chest swelling. "Is Julian." Craig looked gobsmacked. Every head in the room snapped to Julian, who was still on a call and hadn't paid the slightest attention to what was going on.

"Julian," Craig croaked. "Julian!"

"I'm so sorry, do you mind holding for a moment?" Julian muttered into his microphone. "What do you need from me?"

"Margot just told me that you have been using the company for personal use and that you've been buying drugs. Is that true?"

Julian stood in place. Morgan looked down. She could see that his feet were dying to get moving again. "Sir," he said in a whisper. "I would prefer if we could please go in your office and discuss this."

"I think we all deserve to hear the explanation," Morgan said. "I think I speak for everyone when I say I'm feeling a little bit betrayed." Morgan knew that in reality, everyone wanted the interaction to continue as it was an excuse not to plead with people to buy printer ink. Craig, however, nodded in agreement and looked at Julian expectantly.

"Yes, it's true," Julian said. There was a collective sharp intake of breath in the office. Morgan heard a cackle escape from her lips. Julian was red in the face.

"Julian, I-I thought you understood and respected our company values. I'm in shock," Craig sputtered.

"Sir, if I may. The reason I bought those drugs," Julian said, shuffling his

feet, "was for my mother." Morgan's grin faltered. A hush enveloped the office. "She's been... um, she hasn't been well for a long time. I've taken her to every doctor there is and no one can tell us what it is. So I got desperate. I started looking into the experimental treatments they use in South America. I met a man in a park because I know my mother would never want me to do anything illegal, but I'd do anything to see her well again."

Tears were welling in Craig's eyes. None of the employees got up, but a few did lean over in their chairs to pat Julian on the back.

"And I'm sorry about using the company line," Julian continued. "It's just all these treatments. They've been so costly. We had to cancel our phone service. We couldn't afford it."

Craig embraced Julian in a bear hug. "I can't believe you kept this from us. We are a family, we'd look after you. Maybe we can start a fund." There were murmurs of agreement at Craig's suggestion.

Morgan wanted to shrivel up and die. All eyes were still on Julian and Craig, locked in their embrace, but Morgan felt as if she had just painted a huge target on her forehead. She caught a glimpse of her reflection in the water cooler. The constant tugging at her hair had created a wild nest atop her head.

Craig turned to Morgan. "How dare you accuse our best employee... how dare you make him out to be so insidious... get out!"

Morgan didn't need to be told twice. This wasn't the triumphant blaze of glory that she had envisioned, but at least this chapter of her life was finally over. Morgan realized that this was probably the kick she needed. Perhaps she had gone on this goose chase because she subconsciously knew that there could be no coming back if she really made a hash of things. Which she had. Head hung low, she darted toward her desk at a pace Julian could be proud of.

"Wait."

It was Julian who spoke up. He broke free of Craig's clutches and almost made eye contact with Morgan, but he quickly shifted his gaze to the floor. "Morgan did what any good employee should: she reported what she believed to be a conduct violation. You shouldn't fire her."

"No, no. It's fine. Craig is right," Morgan stuttered. "I'll just quickly grab my things and be out of here —"

"Please," Julian said, turning in Craig's direction, but not catching his eyes. "She deserves something for this."

\*\*\*

A couple of the company's biggest clients caught wind of Julian's story. They donated large amounts of money to his mother's cause. Julian also received an unheard of promotion for his excellent work for the company, one that came with a considerable pay increase—another attempt to help him raise more money. His only request for his new office was that the desk was pushed in the very corner so that he had as much space as possible to walk around.

By going out on a limb for her, Julian had trapped Morgan. There was now an expectation that not only would she stay and work for the company, but that she would also work hard. This concept was still foreign to her.

A young man soon filled the old cubicle that Julian had vacated. On one of his first days, Morgan heard him swearing to himself, trying to figure out the computer system. She figured that the new employee had been told of all the drama by her coworkers and didn't want to look him in the eye.

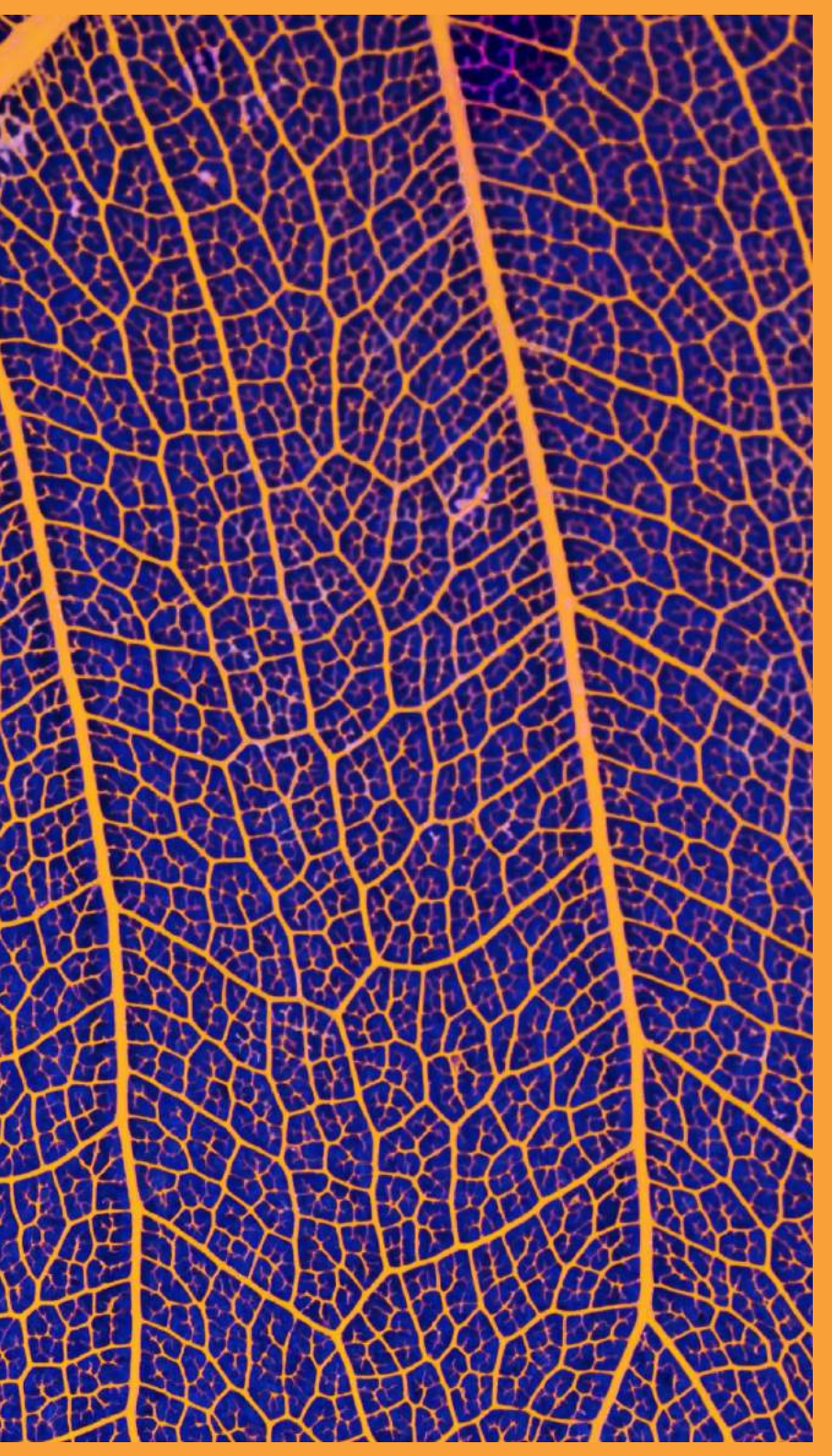
"Just hold control and click," she muttered without addressing him.

"Er... thanks," the new guy said. They sat in silence.

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Alex Wood is an emerging writer and filmmaker with a degree from New York University. His short film *White Slate* has appeared in several New York film festivals. Outside of filmmaking and writing, his interests include going to free art galleries, finding free treasures on the street, reading library books, and winning free brunch coupons at trivia night. If it's free, he's interested.





lcalek

# Heartburn

MAX MILLER

Something as minute as a pistachio croissant  
on a warm summer day in the shade,  
eaten gradually yet still too quickly,  
brings forth a numb, subtle pain  
just below my diaphragm—a lighter case,  
as I feel the bird chirps and hear the breeze,  
and I am lifted away to an August day  
when my pressured chest first roared:

Eating a bell pepper like an apple  
as my five a.m. breakfast,  
herding children onto busses between mouthfuls,  
running on four hours of lipservice to sleep.

Returning to my new, stale apartment,  
where the stove was worn, but not yet by me.  
I scrambled eggs and folded laundry,  
napped for an elusive hour then drank old coffee,  
savoring the placid, thick August sun warmth,  
swimming in the smell of a home not yet my own.

Driving a great van to New Hampshire,  
wide awake from battling droopy eyelids,  
conversing to keep the monotony at bay,  
on a journey with no turns.

Crashing on a thin bed at the end,  
my chest's hand reaching for help  
taking slow breaths,  
as my lungs are barricaded  
by the viscous late August air  
and my brain refuses to land its flight  
its tank too full of caffeine and sugar.

What does my body warn me of?  
A heartburn before the world turned,  
and those precious minute moments  
became as rare as a numb beautiful ache  
after eating a pistachio croissant.

Max Miller is an American poet from New Jersey. He is currently an undergraduate at Tufts University, where he is a Shea Scholar of Political Theory. He creates in his free time by writing poetry, performing and writing jazz, and cooking. In addition to compiling an anthology, he is working on an essay concerning Hobbes' state of nature.



# Attrition

MAX MILLER

Too many wavy nights  
 chest aches, stomach pained, strained  
 under the beration of the bass.  
 In these moments, my legs a rickety fence,  
 I ascend  
 locking eyes as I slyly try  
 to shuffle out of (her) sight.  
 Too much clamor,  
 Too much (raucous) glitzy glamor,  
 I stammer and stumble and fumble with my manners,  
 aiming to maintain a hazy headspace,  
 to keep pace with this (crazy) crowded place,  
 my brain in clouds, body dancing.  
 Squinting, I spotted your smirk, ever so slight,  
 the corner of your mouth was raised,  
 you must've be an actress  
 the way you manipulated your face.  
 To describe your eyes, glazed in desire,  
 (a sheen, a muted fire as he approached)  
 yet not for me.  
 Too many little things,  
 worries enveloping me, my mind slowly bugged,  
 thoughts galloping, coursing like blood.

Too many flow states,  
 dire straits, fingers tapping, clacking,  
 looking in library book stack stacking,  
 working to distract from you.  
 Too many drinks,  
 ounces of whiskey, and your eyes (were) misty,  
 "oh (please) let this get frisky, kiss me."  
 My turn to smirk, I feast  
 on the figs within my reach; bittersweet.  
 Too many dreams,  
 I stay focused, despite purposeful distraction,  
 I do everything within my power to escape,  
 yet gain fractions,  
 I slip and fall as moving chafes,  
 I can't help but smell the flowers and faint  
 the way your eyes looked under the umbra,  
 "trap me (please)."  
 I breathe Bombay in your face in my mirage,  
 yet only vodka in her face below twinkling incandescents,  
 half present, maybe she doesn't mind, I hope (and pray) I'm  
 not too rude, not too inconsiderate,  
 not too shrouded in memory.





# Oh, How My Friends Have Grown

MAX MILLER

A young mother walks by  
with baby slung around her waist,  
asleep, listening to the rhythm  
of the heart through her belly.  
The mother is short and brunette  
with a bun, shades over her eyes  
so her face appears quite symmetrical.  
Pushing her stroller over divets in the pavement  
bricks shuddering under the swagger of her step;  
the baby remains content,  
no mask can stifle  
her mother's bright, powerful lullabies.  
Oh, how my friends have grown.

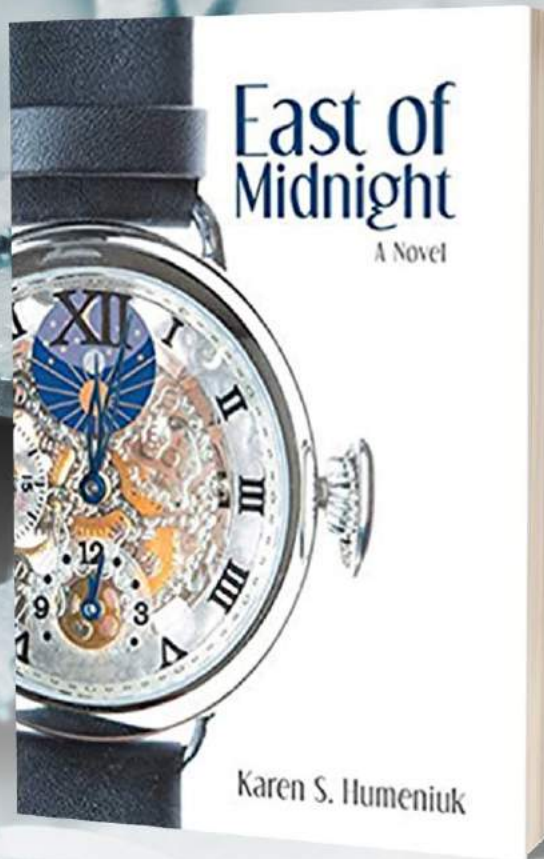
A grandfather lounges  
in his armchair, listening  
to a baseball game on the radio,  
Orioles—A's,  
two cities to which he will never go,  
two teams about which he grumbles.  
The commentary entertains his ears,  
the tips of his fingers chilled by a glass of bourbon,  
which gently flirts with his nostrils  
only to ravenously dance with his taste buds,  
to the music of the drifting cars.  
Oh, how my friends have grown.

Characters populate the hollow streets  
upon which I occasionally roam.  
Shadows speckle the empty field  
upon which I occasionally lie.  
I glance at each one,  
but still have yet to find any  
about which I may sigh, lean back  
and marvel about what my own future will bring.

Karen S. Humeniuk

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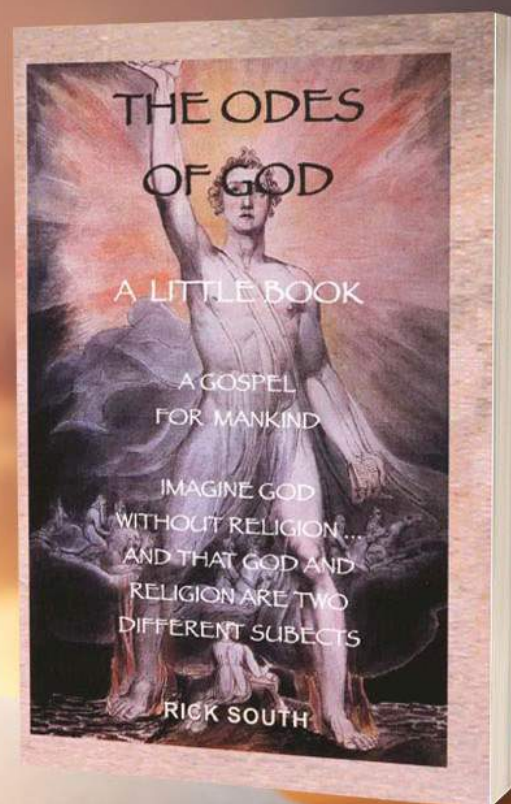
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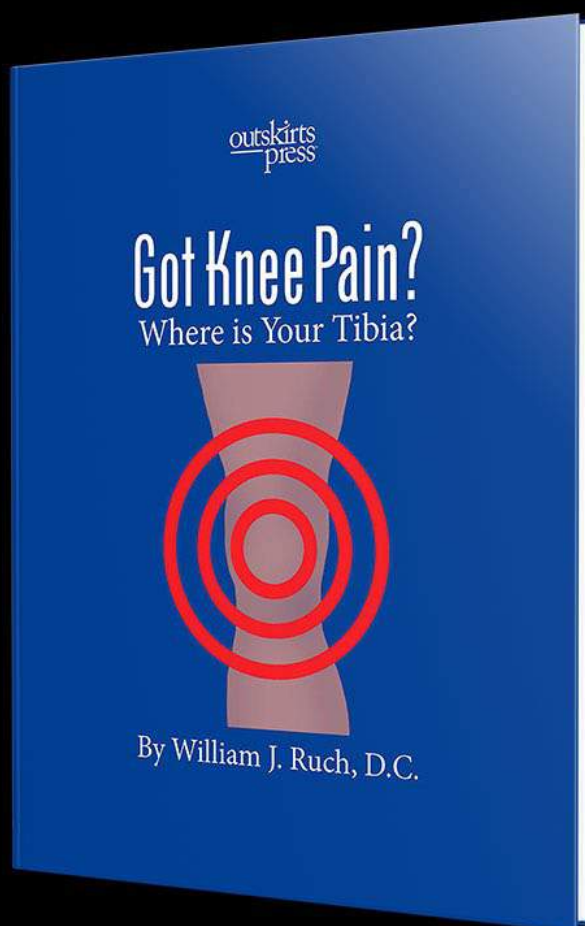
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# Don't Tell

KEITH MANOS

He stands next to my desk and uses this pen with green ink to mark my homework. I'm so used to the red markings that every other teacher uses, I have to stare at his circles and check marks for a minute before I can decipher what they mean.

He's so close. He smells like soap and chalk, and just below his curled up shirt sleeves his forearms bristle with little hairs. "Here, Michaela," he murmurs and makes another mark: a minus sign. "The two is supposed to be a negative." He leans in even closer when he plants his free hand, his left hand, on my desk.

I try to keep my eyes on his right hand, the one holding the weird green pen, like I'm really focusing on the errors I made with my algebra equations—mistakes I made purposely so he would stop at my desk like he's doing right now to correct them—but I don't care what the right answer is. My eyes drift away from the row of jumbled numbers and Xs on my notebook paper.

Brad's fingernails are clipped, his fingers smooth and hairless, the knuckles unbruised and symmetrical. In the front of the classroom by the door, one of my 11th grade classmates is showing something on his phone to two other boys, who then break away laughing.

Mr. Miller—Brad—straightens up. "Cool it," he demands. "Work on numbers six to ten, gentlemen." Then he bends, rests his left hand on my desk again, and taps the point of the pen on my paper. "You have to find the product . . ."

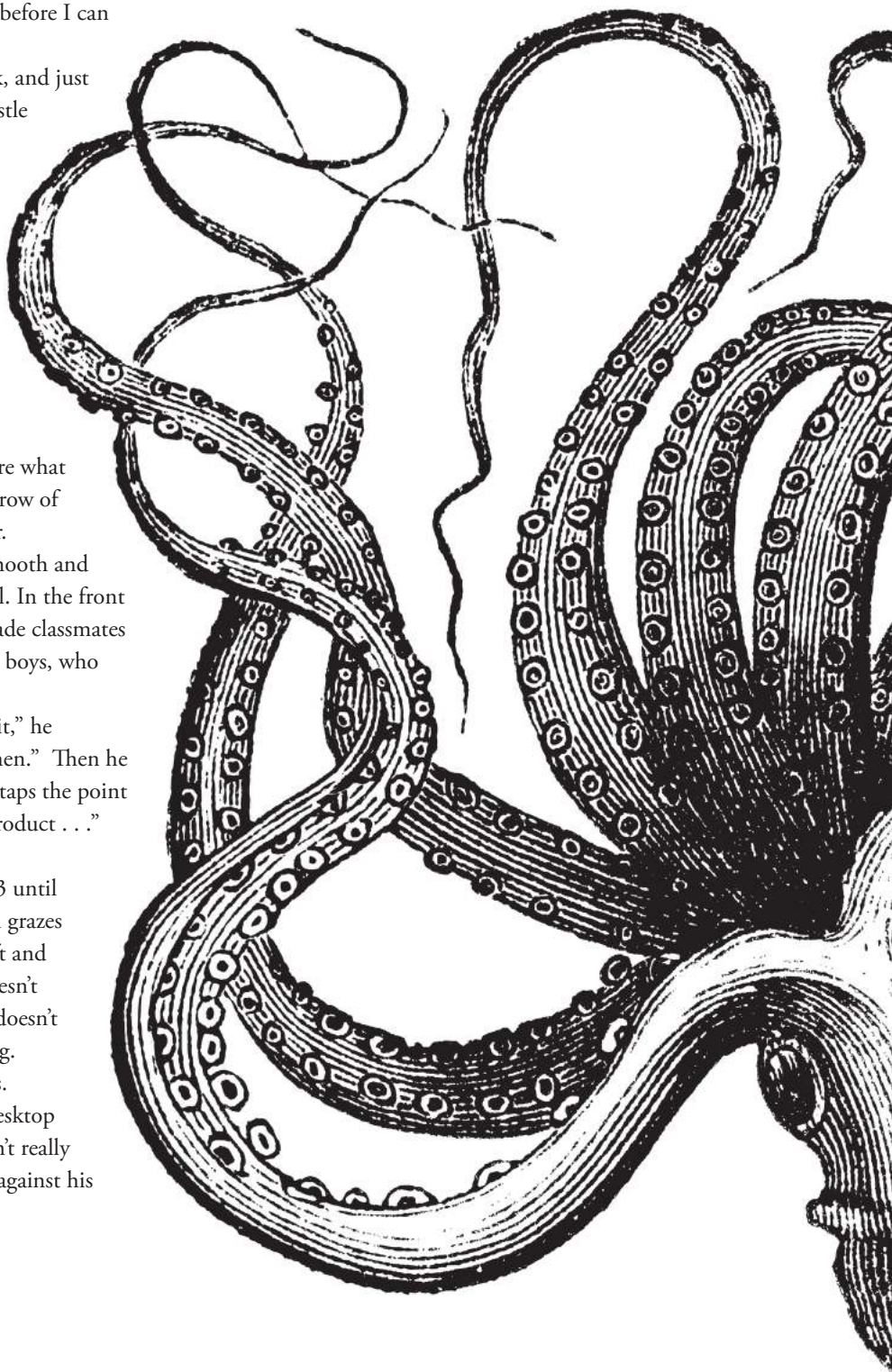
I don't hear the rest.

I pretend to get a better look at problem #3 until our bodies touch just enough so that his left arm grazes my right breast. His brown eyes keep moving left and right over my notebook paper so I can tell he doesn't realize how he's connected to me right now. He doesn't even look at me, and I wonder what he's thinking. Polynomials probably. Linear equations. Integers.

Brad keeps that left hand planted on the desktop while he moves his pen across my paper, so I don't really have to move my body. Even when I rub a little against his arm, he doesn't react.

Now he's pointing at #4. "What's the x factor here, Michaela?"

I re-focus and look at his corrections. I nod my head just enough so I have to slide my hair back behind my ears. I make my voice sound like I'm talking to a doctor. "Positive four?" I say. Then I look up at him—at the faint stubble on his chin, the stiff edges of the collar of his white shirt, his loose red tie—the same look I've seen on television detectives, the men who



grab the jackets of criminals and shove them up against a wall and later sip scotch from little glasses.

"That's correct. There you go." Brad's chirpy voice makes me feel for a moment like he's talking to a puppy. He even lifts his left arm off the desk to pat my back, his fingers lingering for a moment on the clasp of my bra, and I feel my body surge and then retreat when he removes his hand. He points at #4. "You see, you neglected the double negative here."

The rest of the class doesn't notice Brad and me. Why would they? They're supposed to be working on the next problems, but most are peering into their laps, their fingers moving feverishly on their iPhones. Only a few have their eyes on their textbooks.

Except for Shauna in the back of the classroom.

I feel her eyes on Brad and me; they're digging angrily into my back.



Patrick Guenette

"Michaela," Brad lectures, "you need to multiply by two here, not divide." Now he's pointing at #5, another one I know is wrong. "Try again."

I peer at the paper where his pen has stopped. "Okay. But can I go to the bathroom?"

He straightens up, nods, points to his hall pass resting against the chalkboard at the front of the room, and steps forward to check Steve Peplin's work.

I get up and stand next to him for a moment, feeling his height against me, judging how he would lean down to put his arm around my waist or to hold my hand. What that would look like. What that would feel like. Another wave of energy shoots through me, and I almost put my hand on his back to get him to move a little so I can step around him. I want any excuse to touch him. To see if he can sense my feelings through my hand.

And if he could, would he chastise me for viewing him that way, a teacher, for God's sake? *What are you thinking, Michaela?*

So instead, I keep my hands at my sides and go the other direction, purposely keeping my eyes away from Shauna, and when I reach the front of the classroom I hear Brad tell Steve how to reduce the polynomial to its common number. At the doorway those same boys murmur something behind my back. "Fat tits," one of them says, I think, and the others snicker. Brad is busy and doesn't hear them.

I pretend I don't hear them either although I think they want me to. The three of them are leaning in again to look at the one boy's cellphone, their faces showing anticipation and amusement.

In the hallway I take only a brief glance back into the room at Brad to see if he's looking at me, but he isn't. He's helping Dana Phillips now, his left hand resting on the back of her chair so that if she leaned back he could touch her if he wanted. I can tell by the sweep of his hand he's putting check marks on her homework answers. This makes Dana smile at her paper and then up at Brad, the same look I remember from her yearbook picture, like she was already starting a career as a model. Brad smiles back at the bitch. I can't remember—did Brad smile at me that way?

*Brad.*

*Bradley?*

I like the name Brad, but then there's BM. His initials are terrible. I would never tell him that, though. He's a proud man.

I hurry down the dim, empty hallway, a stale antiseptic smell still lingering from the morning, and feel my stomach turning. I don't have to touch it to know my forehead is hot, but I do anyway and the palm of my hand comes away damp

and warm. This makes me move even faster to the bathroom.

I'm glad the restroom is empty. I barge into a stall and, kneeling quickly, I throw up, heaving for almost a minute until little brown bits of my morning cereal bob on top of the toilet water. When I finish, I flush immediately and listen for the door opening and any footsteps. Thankfully, I'm still alone, and although the urge to vomit has passed, I stay there in the coffin-like stall and wait until I know I'm breathing. It's like I'm discovering my lungs again, and when my breaths finally have a steady rhythm, I open the door and step to the sink, its white porcelain already stained by some girl's makeup.

I have my purse. I have my phone. Shauna texts me.

*U r crazy you think hes gonna pick u.*

Her accusation makes my face grow hot again. I cup some water in my palm and then swish it around my mouth and spit. Next, I splash water on my forehead and cheeks, and some drops splash onto my red Bayview High School t-shirt. Today is the final day of Spirit Week. The football team is undefeated. Because the Bulldogs have a game tonight, the players are wearing their white jerseys with red numerals with their sleeves pulled up tight on their upper arms. They jostle each other and laugh when they walk down the hallways between classes. Sometimes the cheerleaders walk with them.

I slip my bangs back behind my ears and check my face in the mirror. It isn't a cheerleader face. My nose isn't small enough. My eyes are a dull gray. And my shoulders slope a little so I could never hold another cheerleader there like I've seen them do at games. My hair, Shauna, says, is too short and too mousy—too short, in fact, for pigtails, which I suspect Brad would like. The girl he picked last year had pigtails.

Shauna thinks she's helping me; she's my best friend. I text her back.

???

When I return to Brad's room, I walk briskly past the boys who sit near the door. I give Shauna a whatever look where she's sitting in the back of the classroom, and she slowly shakes her head at me. Then, preparing to leave class at the bell, she starts stacking her books on her desktop.

Head down, Brad, too, is stacking papers, our homework, into a yellow plastic tray at his desk. The tray says Period 4 on it. Picture frames of his family—I peek at them every time I enter his classroom—stand like little sentries on either side of his wooden desk. I notice with disappointment that he already retrieved my paper off my desk. I can't hand it to him personally.

Next period, at lunch, Shauna plops down on a chair across from me, her thick-waisted body jostling the chair for a moment, and leans her scrunched up face towards me across

the Formica table, her eyes squinting like she's trying to focus them. "You are crazy, Mac. He doesn't like you that way."

I look around the cafeteria, the football players tipping sports drinks at their mouths, other kids with notebook papers copying homework assignments, freshmen at the next table over trying to steal chicken nuggets from each other's little cardboard baskets. I pretend I'm looking for the boy she's talking about. I stretch my neck. "Who?"

"Bullshit, Michaela." Shauna stabs a plastic fork into one of her own chicken nuggets and sticks the speared piece into her mouth.

I put on my question mark face and look at a table of football players in their white jerseys. Robbie Pugh is #31. "Robbie? I don't like Robbie."

Shauna doesn't wait to finish chewing her chicken nugget. "He's almost bald, Michaela. He must be seventy years old."

My stomach starts hurting again, and I set down on a plastic bag the green grapes I'm eating, another diet I'm trying. The bathroom is across the hall from the lunchroom about a hundred feet from our table, but it will probably be crowded now. I peer across at the freshmen boys munching on their nuggets and slashing open their bags of chips, then past them to the football players again.

I pretend to study Robbie Pugh. "Robbie isn't bald."

Shauna lets out a big breath. "Whatever." Like she doesn't care. She takes a gulp from her milk carton. I know she's irritated even though her tone remains emotionless; I've become an expert in her voice.

I calculate again the distance to the bathroom, the route I would take between the white cafeteria tables, the teacher monitor who would ask where I was going. Then I take inventory: My feet feel like they are ten feet away from my shoulders. My stomach is waiting for permission from my mouth.

I lift my head and stare at Shauna. "Vin Diesel is bald."

"Vin Diesel?" Shauna's laughter is more like a cackle as she stands up and slides her plastic tray off the table. "You are wacked, Michaela. He doesn't like you that way. He isn't going to pick you." She studies me for a moment. "He likes those athletic kind of girls."

I review in my head the girls Brad has selected before. "Hanna Greshem was fat," I remind her. Hanna graduated two years ago and now attends a small college in Indiana on a track scholarship. Discus, I think. She had mousy hair, too.

"Like I said, you are messed up," Shauna declares and then stomps away to return her tray.

I watch her go and quietly say to her back. "You don't

know him.” Then I rush past the teacher to the bathroom.

After lunch, the hallway is full of kids weaving in and out, going to classes they don’t like, indifferent to the bell, most of them hunched over by their book bags. I follow them, faking any urgency to get to my next class. The rest of the school day is stupid group work in English, coloring anti-drug posters in health, and at the end a pep rally for the football team.

For the pep rally, we crowd into the gym and watch the cheerleaders do a dance to some hip-hop song, the hems of their red skirts lifting high enough at times to make some boys hoot at them. When they finish and amble weirdly off the court with their fists stuck at their sides, we all clap. Brad sits on the other side of the gym with some teachers. When the coach introduces the football team, Brad claps for each player and even pumps his fist when the barrel-chested coach reminds us all in an overly loud voice that the team is undefeated. Afterwards I watch Brad exit the gym with Mrs. Spiesman, another math teacher. She’s older than Brad; she has streaks of gray hair and is heavy in her hips. He says something, jerks his thumb behind him, and she laughs.

After the rally, school is over, and students empty the hallways as if toxic waste had been spilled there. Shauna and I have to bum a ride home today, and when I see a senior, Billy Osborne, I know from chemistry class, I ask him for a ride. Billy sizes me up, like he’s choosing a tux for prom, and then peers over my shoulder at Shauna.

“Both of you?” he asks.

“Yeah, both of us,” Shauna demands. “C’mon, Osborne, help us out. You can tell your friends tomorrow we hit on you.”

Billy’s eyes go wide and his cheeks get red, telling me his surprise, like he’s been to mime school. He pulls out his keys, turns his back to us, and waves an arm at us as if he’s a sergeant leading his platoon into the jungle. “My car is over here.”

Bayview kids who don’t drive are always trying to hitch a ride—the school district has no busing. Billy drives an old Monte Carlo, and when we reach it, Shauna gets in the back and smiles mischievously at me when I sit next to Billy in the front seat. It’s like Billy and I are a married couple with our child, Shauna, in the back.

I privately enjoy my own analogy and tell Shauna, “Buckle up, honey.”

“Very funny,” she responds and looks out the window as Billy gets in line behind a dozen other cars waiting to exit the Bayview High School parking lot.

I turn to Billy. “Sycamore Street,” I tell him.

He nods and finally maneuvers his Monte Carlo out

onto the street. Some kids are riding their bikes home from school. Others are walking, and why not? This October day is warm and breezy, the leaves just now changing color, the puffy, milk-colored clouds like hilly islands in the blue sky. I’d walk too if my street wasn’t so far away. Shauna wouldn’t though, so after school we are always looking for a ride.

Billy hums a little and then turns on the radio. “I was thinking about getting Sirius,” he tells us, his voice like a stock investor’s, “but I decided it wasn’t worth it. I’m okay with the stations we got here.”

I nod although I’m not certain he was soliciting any agreement. Billy keeps pulling one hand off the steering wheel to swipe his sandy brown hair off his forehead, but he drives carefully: He does full stops at stop signs, he looks both ways, he doesn’t play rap songs on the radio too loud. I push my finger on the door switch and let the window slide down halfway. The Bayview neighborhoods smell like cut grass. The leaves on the oak trees bordering the tree lawns are turning different shades of red and orange. I catch Billy looking at me—at my chest actually—although when I do catch his eyes on me, he pretends he’s checking the side mirror, and I want to tell him, it’s not happening. You know, just because he gave us a ride, I should let him put his hands on me?

Billy blushes a little and lets his wispy hair stay strewn across his forehead, as if he can conceal his face for a while. He gestures his head to Shauna, and then peers at her in his rearview mirror. “Where do you live?”

“I’m going to Michaela’s,” she tells him. “You’re a good dude to do this for us.”

“Yeah, well . . . no problem. I live out this way kinda.”

A block away from Sycamore, Billy stops at a red light. “I got some ganja in the glove compartment. We could go somewhere and smoke it if you like.” He says this like he’s asking a question.

Now I understand why he was driving so carefully. “No, Billy,” I tell him, “but we appreciate the ride, though.”

“Hey, wait—” Shauna scoots forward quickly in the back seat.

I stop her. “I have to get home . . . I’m not feeling well.”

Shauna leans back and exhales loudly. “Oh, shit, Michaela.” Then she goes back to staring out the window.

“Okay. Whatever.” Billy shrugs and swipes his hair again off his forehead.

When Shauna and I get inside my house, I put my backpack on the kitchen counter and wave to Mom, who, unsmiling, waves back to Shauna and me and then turns her back to us to speak into the phone, like she’s suddenly in private mode. I smell meat in a crockpot.

“What bill?” Mom asks. She turns, and her eyes are staring at the opposite wall, as if she could see whom she’s talking to. She’s dressed in jeans and a t-shirt that doesn’t fit her. *Dad’s*? She must not have gone to work today, or she came home early.

“It’s always money with you, Len.”

Now I get it. She’s talking to Dad, who must be at another business conference; he’s gone all the time.

Shauna gives me the wide-eyed look, as in “What the fuck is this shit?” and heads up the stairs to my bedroom.

Mom goes on. “I didn’t make that reservation.” Now her voice is angry. “I never made a reservation with your credit card . . . What? . . . When? . . . I was *here*, Len.”

I linger in the kitchen just long enough to fill a bowl with chips and two glasses with Coke. Sunlight streams in through the windows, but Mom’s face darkens. “Len, how would I know how many miles you have on your American Airlines card?” Her face shows concentration and confusion, like she’s examining a plate of food she’s never seen before. “I’m telling you I didn’t make any reservation.”

I slide my backpack off the counter and onto my shoulder, put the bowl and glasses on a tray, and head up to my bedroom. Shauna has already planted herself on my bed, making me feel like a visitor in my own room. I set the tray on the nightstand and then sit on the rug, which forces me to look up at Shauna, who is already snatching and eating one chip after another. “You goin?” she asks, each word said separately between crunches.

“To the game?”

Shauna stops chewing. “No, to Brad’s birthday party. Yes, the game!”

“I don’t know.” I reach for my glass and take a sip. “I have to check with my mom.”

“If you knew for sure Miller was there, you would. Huh?” Shauna is anything but subtle. She likes it when she can feel like she knows something before anyone else.

I take another sip before saying, “Shauna, it’s not like that.”

Shauna is enjoying herself. “Maybe he’ll come with his wife.”

Now I think Shauna is trying either to hurt me or make a point. I raise the glass but hardly drink from it because now I’m having trouble swallowing. My room smells of dust and stale air. “I’m going,” I tell her almost defiantly. “You coming with me?”

Only a moment passes. “I wouldn’t miss it,” she answers, smiling wryly.

I’m not certain what *it* is. Shauna has always been like

that: one time wide open and direct, the next time closed up and cryptic. Like when we were on the playground for recess in 5th grade and Libby Morris made fun of my new haircut (my mom did it), Shauna punched Libby in the chest, knocking her to the ground, and then stood over her ready to hit her again if she got up. Sniffling, her eyes never leaving Shauna’s angry face, Libby had to scoot away on her butt. And later, as we got in line to go back to our classroom, I asked Shauna why she did that. “Timing was right,” she said. Ever since, we’ve been best friends.

“What are you girls doing tonight?” Mom is suddenly in my doorway, her face still flushed from her phone conversation.

“Football game,” Shauna says cheerfully. Her voice becomes a mock whisper: “We’re going to check out the boys,” and then she turns to me, “I mean the men.”

Mom sticks both hands on her hips and chuckles. “Well, well, well,” she says. “Sounds like an interesting evening.” Then her voice drops an octave. “Good luck picking the right one.”

After she leaves and I finally hear her footsteps on the stairwell, I turn to Shauna. “Brad is not that old.”

“What’s wrong with the boys in our school?” Shauna reaches her hand into the bowl and takes the last of the chips.

*What is wrong with them?* I think of Brad and me at the movies. In the back of a dark theater. If people saw us together, what would they say?

I give in. “Don’t tell anyone, Shauna. Keep this a secret, okay?”

“Mac, you are crazy.” Shauna gulps down her Coke and scoots off the bed. “I’ll meet you later.” Shauna stomps down the stairs and out the front door. She lives only a block away.

Two hours later I dress in my most attractive clothes: my black yoga pants, a tight cami, an unbuttoned denim shirt. I even paint my nails and then spray on the perfume my mother gave me for my last birthday.

Mom drops me off at the football game, and I find Shauna sitting on the edge of the senior section, as if daring the seniors to make her move. No one obviously told her—or they were scared to—a junior, to move, so I trudge up the aisle and sit with her.

On the field, players run around and then fall down. The first half is full of whistles, cheerleaders telling us over and over to “Go Bayview,” and weird chants from the senior student section, but my eyes are on Brad. He’s sitting below me to the left with Mr. Morgan, a biology teacher who’s announced he’s retiring this year. I can see Brad’s balding head turn every few minutes to look at Mr. Morgan when he gestures to the field. When Brad turns for some reason to check out the press box

announcer, we make eye contact. He smiles briefly, gives me a little nod, and then turns back to the game. For a moment I can't breathe. The air is getting stuck in my lungs.

"Michaela!" Shauna is annoyed. She jostles my shoulder with hers.

"What? I'm watching the game."

"No, you're not."

At halftime I tell Shauna I'm going to the bathroom and sneak instead into the school. I go through the band door entrance and into the lobby and then slip down the first floor hallway, which is still brightly lit as if school was in session. All the classroom doors are open for the custodians to clean and empty the trash, but the custodians aren't there—they must be on break or out in the football stadium. I move down the hall until I reach Brad's room and step inside. The unlit classroom has the feel of a tomb.

I stroll the aisles for several minutes, the same way Brad does when he checks our homework, but stop when I get to my own desk. So many times he's stood over me here, one time gently tapping my shoulder, another time my hand, as his rhythmic teacher's voice guides me through an algebra problem.

I then step tentatively to the front of the classroom and lift one of the framed pictures off Brad's desk. It shows Brad with his wife and family—two little girls in plaid jumpers, all of them smiling. I can see them in another place, eating dinner or shopping in a toy store or snuggling together.

Holding the picture frame, I examine their smiles again, all of them obviously happy about a life they have stolen from me. My heart thumps against my ribs, my mouth goes dry, and each of my legs seems thirty pounds heavier, but I smash the frame on his desk anyway and use his green pen to scratch out the faces on the now-exposed photograph. And I don't stop: I rip posters off the walls. One says "Math = No Problem." Another: "One thing you can't recycle is wasted time." And the last one: "Today is a great day to learn something new." I tear them up with my hands and then have to sit at Steve Peplin's desk for a minute, surprised at my own exhaustion.

I catch my breath and examine Brad's quiet room as if I've entered it for the first time: The desks are in orderly rows, the chalkboard still shows equations, and the shades are all neatly drawn halfway down the windows.

The cemetery silence makes my ears hurt, so I leave his room as soundlessly as I entered and head outside to the football stadium, which glimmers like an alien spaceship beneath gray clouds and a black sky on the other side of the parking lot. The dark air cools my skin.

Suddenly, a roar erupts from the Bayview stands, and I feel drawn for a moment to rush into the stadium to find out if we scored. But I don't.

That's because Brad is walking toward me, his head down, his eyes on the car keys in his hand. I hide between two SUVs and let him pass and then fall into step behind him. I stay quiet and wait until he nears his car and unlocks it.

"Brad?"

He turns, startled. Then he scans the parking lot, craning his neck left and right, searching I know for witnesses, before settling his gaze on me. His face carefully expressionless, Brad sizes me up, just like Billy did. He opens his car door on the passenger side and finally says, "You look like you need a ride, Michaela." He even winks.

My heart pounds with pride.

I make my face smile and promise myself not to gloat to Shauna.

I get in his car.

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Keith Manos is a veteran English teacher who in 2000 was named Ohio's High School English Teacher of the Year by OCTELA and inducted into the National Honor Roll of Outstanding American Teachers in 2006. His fiction has appeared in many national print and online magazines. You can check out all his books at [www.keithmanos.com](http://www.keithmanos.com)

# A MOTHER

Chipo Gocha

Where I live, you either have a mother  
Or you don't.  
Where I live everyone has a mother  
But circumstances donate her as  
They see fit.

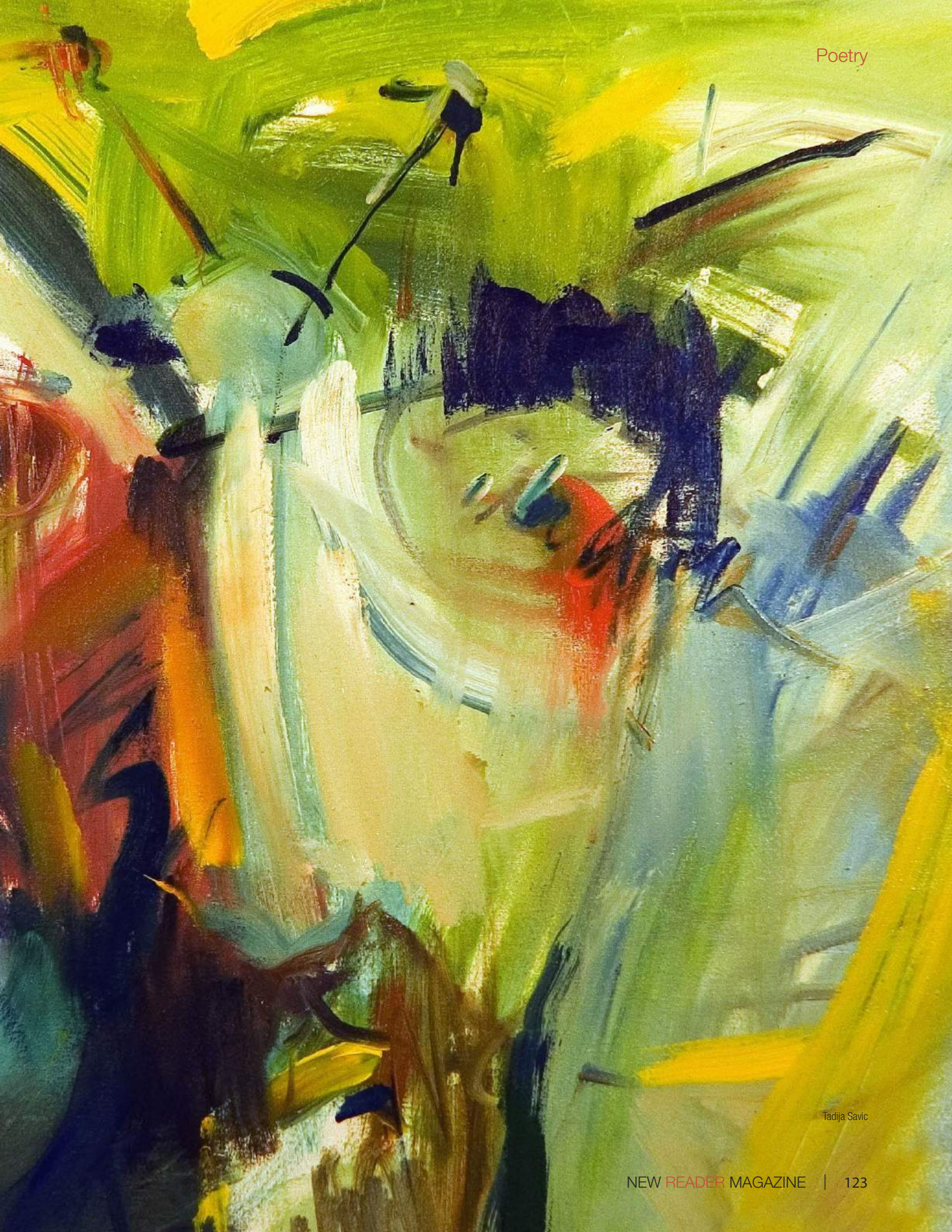
Where I live everyone wishes upon a mother  
But they don't all get to have one.  
Where I live a mother dies  
And she controls your life even in the grave.

A mother from where I live  
Is your beginning and your end.  
A mother in my life  
Has cursed me to follow her footsteps.

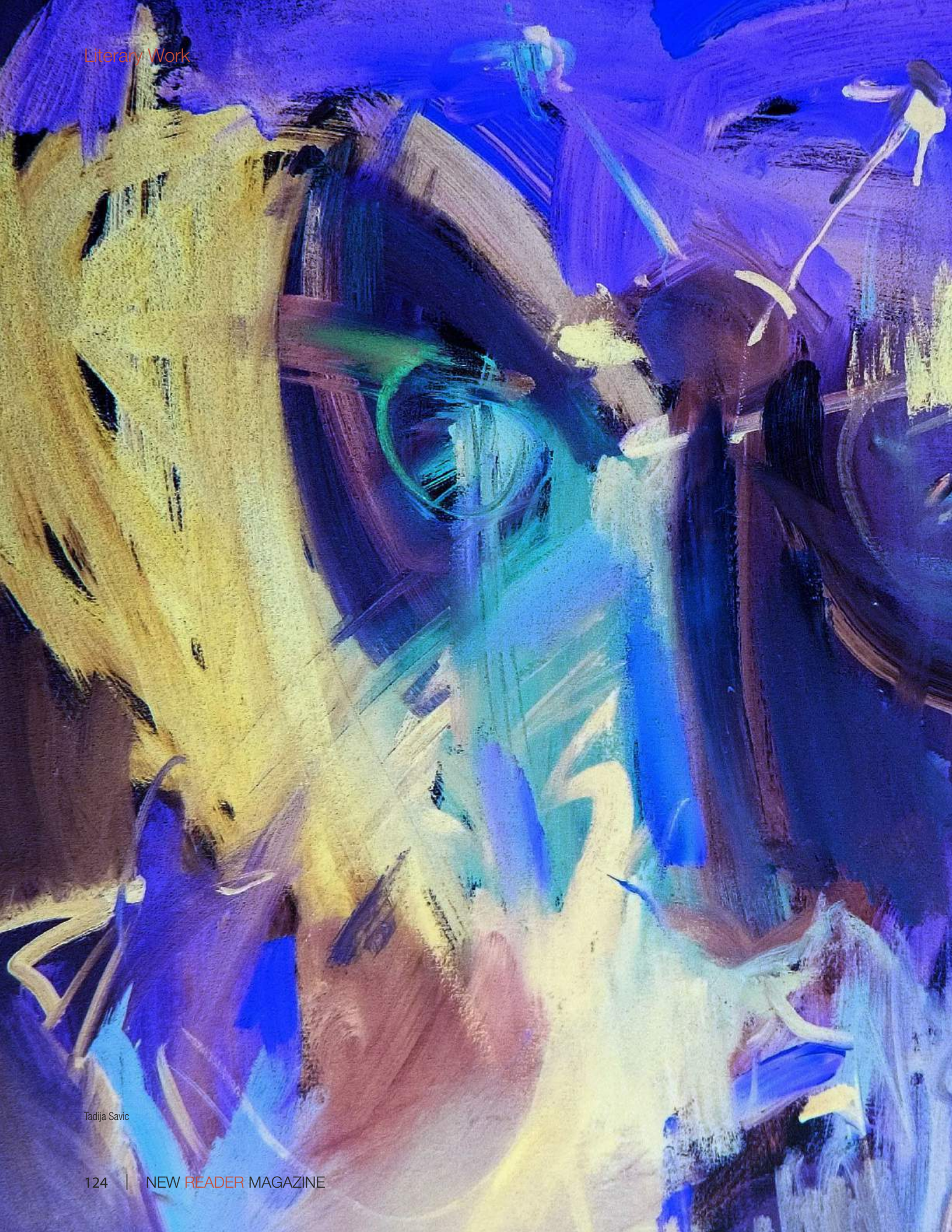
She is the mother from where I come from.  
The mother who haunts you even in her grave.  
The mother who curses me in her casket.  
She calls me to return to dust

Chipo Gocha was born in Zimbabwe and she has always been a fan of literature studies ever since she was young. It then motivated her to write short stories and poetry. When she is not writing, she's at school finishing up her bachelor's In Social Sciences and Humanities studies and some occasional golfing. She recently just started submitting her work for publications so it's a learning step for her, but with belief, she can make it.





Tadija Savic



Tadija Savic



## THE MEMORY ESCAPES ME

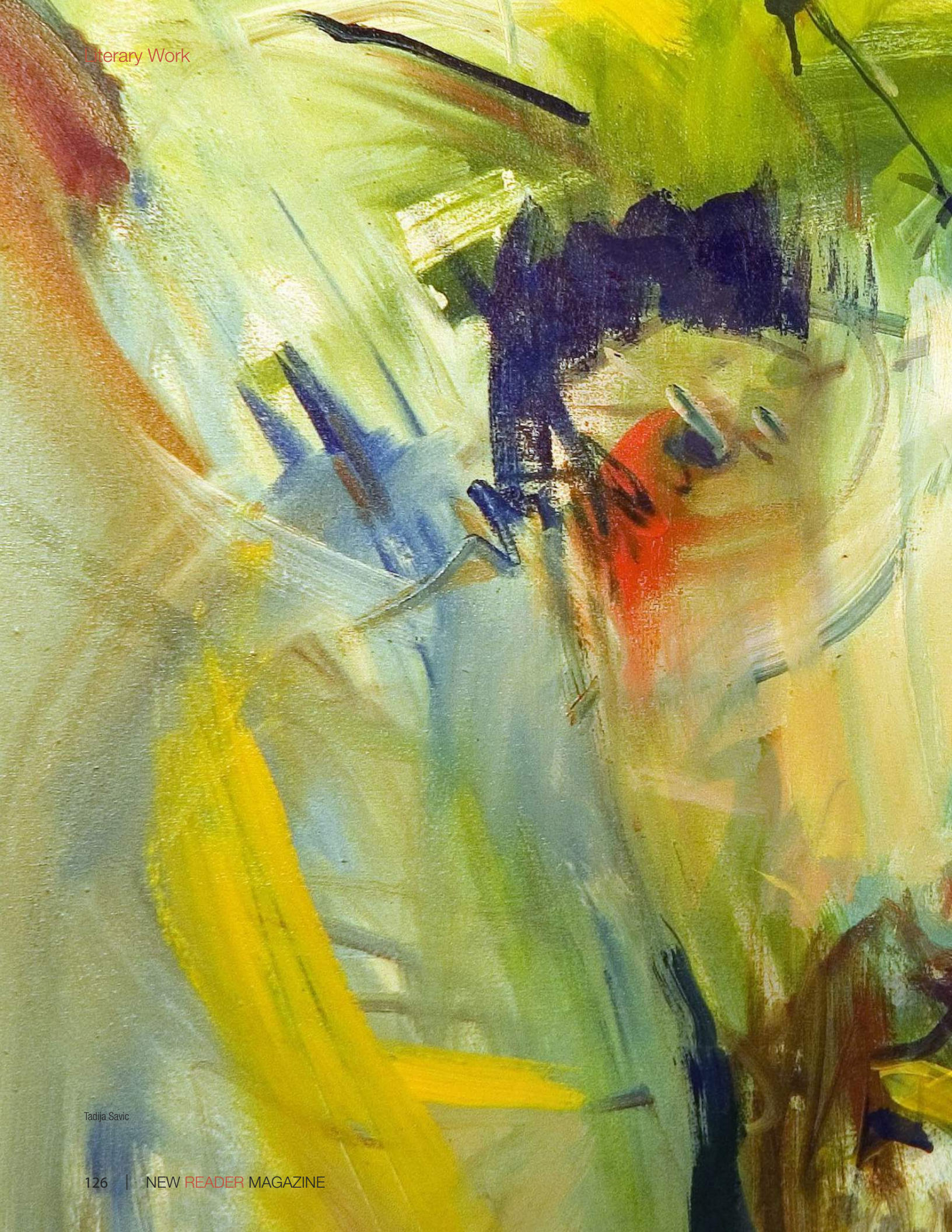
Chipo Gocha

My earliest memory of her was in a dream  
She was dressed in white and she saved my life  
There was no face and no voice but I know she came to me  
And stopped me from following the man dressed in black.

Memories have abandoned my mind  
Her face is a blank photograph on a doomed day  
Her voice is a broken piano that grates on my nerves  
Her touch even my one year old body remembers not.

I want to remember  
I cry my eyes out to remember  
I yearn to feel that forgotten touch again  
Then maybe I may rise from the decadent shame I feel.

She fades from the memory  
Of the only daughter she never knew.  
And if by chance the wisps of her scent ever pass by me again  
I pray they lead me to her.



Tadija Savic

# PRAISE MY MOTHER FOR ME

Chipo Gocha

Thank you to a blank face  
In a blank picture awaiting  
Recognition in a blank album  
By a shameful daughter.

Thank you to a forgotten touch  
Holding on to a forgotten memory  
Awaiting the warmth that comes with being loved  
By a resentful daughter.

Thank you to a soundless voice  
Aiming to rise higher than a tuba  
Endlessly shouting an unheard warning  
That will never help an uncaring daughter.

Thank you to a woman  
Resting in an unmarked grave  
Awaiting a tombstone showered with praises  
From an untiring daughter.

# TWO-BIT CRIMINALS

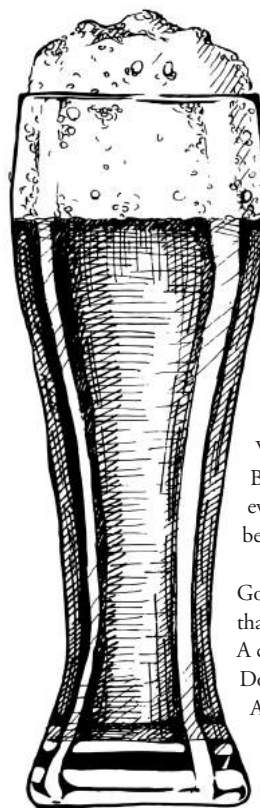
John Krieg

These guys were two-bit criminals  
Without the discernment necessary  
To avoid attention while racing down the freeway  
At 20 miles per hour over the limit while recklessly  
Zigzagging through traffic while  
They were talking on their cell phones  
Without their seat belts on

I slunk down further on the passenger side  
of the truck fully expecting law enforcement  
To reel us in at any moment, but  
These guys seemed as if they could care less  
Two-bit criminals always seem to slide by  
While I get tickets for jay walking, and  
Penalties for being late with my mortgage payment

We were heading toward a small working class town  
Where the citizens struggled to keep their heads above water  
And many were involved in the marijuana trade in order  
To keep a roof over their heads and their kids fed  
With shoes on their feet and new cloths on their back  
But two-bit criminals don't care about that  
They just want to get rich quick

Heading to Freak's crib; my old friend  
To check out his clones:  
Blue Dream, Wedding Cake, and OG  
Jack the Ripper, Headband, and GDP  
As well as a host of his recent hybrids  
Freak was lost in the sixty's, he was  
The last of the true heads



And a lighted neon peace symbol  
Was propped up in his only window

None of this mattered to the two-bit criminals  
We needed to split/vamoose/book/jet  
Get out of there and get on the road  
Get these clones potted, and then get another load  
Push, push, push, and then push even harder  
The single purpose driven by a real sense of purpose  
The outlaw's life is not as glamorous as it seems

I suppose at this juncture you might be wondering  
just how an old-school grower such as myself has  
come to be mixed up with these two-bit criminals?  
Well... that's a long and convoluted story  
But, the abridged version is I'm now too old to do  
everything myself and in needing assistance I had to choose  
between the corporate douche-bags and the outlaws

Government chooses to interface with businesses  
that are in their own image and likeness  
A corporate mentality attracts another corporate mentality  
Douche-bags of a feather flock together  
And when California rolled out its legal cannabis policies  
It was readily apparent that the old-school growers  
Had been much better off when pot was illegal

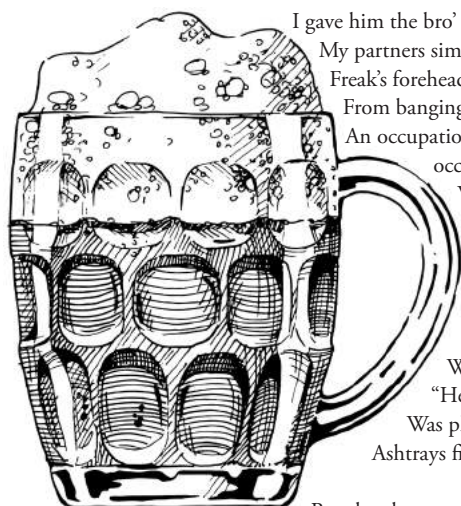
But I voted for legalization, anyway  
Because I had bitched my entire adult life  
About the unfairness of it all, and  
Now the situation is more unfair than it ever was  
I had to join forces with someone in order to survive  
And besides, the corporations would never accept me  
Leaving me to throw in with these two-bit criminals

The thing I like the least about the two-bit criminals  
Is that they will do *anything* to get a crop to harvest  
Very little of it good for the environment, and  
Some of it not so good for the end smokers  
So I had to lay down some ground rules  
Before allowing them to grow on my land, knowing  
That two-bit criminals are not big on rules

Spring was coming  
The days grew longer  
The soil warmed  
The potted clones  
Wanted the earth  
My blood was pumping hard  
It was time

Captain Ron is a little excitable due to mortar fire  
landing too close to home during Desert Storm  
He doesn't hear so good and he talks too loud  
But he is a wiz grower, kind of like  
Tommy the Who's pinball wizard of yesteryear  
Just get the Captain's feet on your ground, and  
The land speaks its own secret language to him

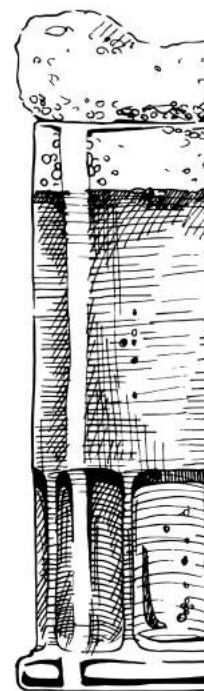
Most of the guys at the hydro stores think that  
they know it all, but here's what I know:  
They don't know shit, and



I gave him the bro' hug  
My partners simply nodded their heads  
Freak's forehead had a perpetual gaping sore  
From banging it on the clone room lights  
An occupational hazard that  
occurs late at night  
We made our selections, and  
went into his office to  
settle accounts  
Posters of Jimi and Janis  
papered the walls  
While the Rolling Stone's  
"Heart of Stone"  
Was playing in the background  
Ashtrays filled with roaches abounded

Beer bottles were haphazardly strewn about

suricoma



will say anything to make a sale  
They might know what they have in stock, but  
They don't know a goddamned thing  
about growing marijuana

Put up a greenhouse in this county, and  
they'll tear it down the next day  
You have to grow outside, and  
do as they say - and pay - always pay  
For their backroom permits and hidden fees  
That stick to your flesh like blood sucking flees  
And you have to pay - always pay - paypaypay

Sun grown marijuana can truly be stellar weed  
But it's a tough slog to bring it to harvest  
It's the growers against the elements  
It's the growers against the poor soil  
It's the growers against the insects  
The growers against the vermin, the worst  
amongst them walking on two legs

That stupid fucking helicopter is at it again  
Hovering overhead like an angry hornet  
Makes me wish for a RPG (not really)  
At times like this I try to remember that  
These are sons, brothers, husbands and fathers  
These are daughters, sisters, wives, and mothers  
And my freedom is just a game to them

Finally fall arrives, and  
the dog days of summer are over  
Time to finish what we started  
Get it in  
Get it trimmed  
Get it sold  
Get ready for next year

How much of a fucking lowlife loser does  
someone have to be to be a ripper?  
To steal from the sweat of another man's brow  
To slink about like the rat in *Rikki-tikki-tivi*  
Living a life that is always a lie  
Always afraid of the bullet or knife  
destined to land in their back - good riddance

The buyers are the worst of the worst, at least  
amongst those who won't rob you outright  
But they'll take every advantage that they can  
They'll intimidate you where they can if you let them  
They'll bluff about market conditions if you're naive  
They'll cajole you before offering rock bottom dollar  
They'll bitch until you just give in to get rid of them

Fucking Yolanda is smoking hot and cold as ice  
Jaws in a miniskirt and lace-up thigh highs  
Pushing that pushup bra into your face  
And robbing you blind while you stare in place  
It's all about the weight, and the strain's reputation  
She could care less about how it was grown  
Pot is pot - that's all she or we need to know

Magic Jack has been at this a long time

He's seen it all and knows every trick in the book  
But he lives by the old outlaw code  
(Before the arrival of the two-bit criminals)  
That being that true outlaws don't fuck  
other outlaws under any circumstances at all  
Those days are mostly gone now; dead and buried

None of this matters to the two-bit criminals  
They live crop to crop any way that they can  
They live to chop them off at the ground  
Move on to the next day, on to the next town  
Do what you have to do to get another crop  
in the ground; soon to be followed by  
getting it out of the ground and into a bag

The two-bit criminals are well aware  
Of the first business law of growing:  
*Have a connection; without a connection  
nothing happens - all is for naught*  
Better not to ask about their connections  
That I'll never know and don't want to meet  
I know this: the weed is safe, I won't  
have to answer to my Lord for anyone's fate

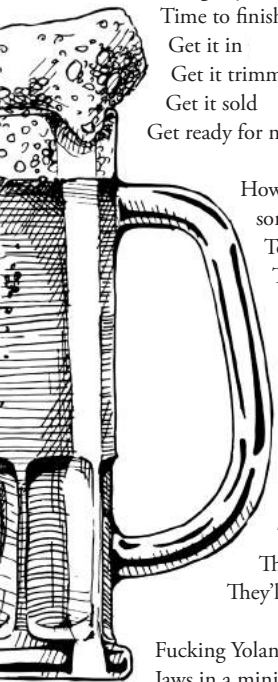
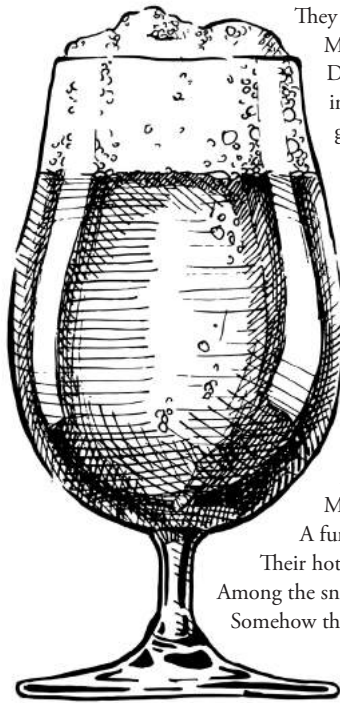
The two-bit criminals deliver my end, as promised  
Maybe they will grow into the old outlaw code  
Maybe not - they're still reckless and carefree  
A fun way to live, but perhaps not for long  
Their hot new vehicles inspire envy  
Among the snitches and the cops, but  
Somehow they persist and look forward to next year

Winter is here, and the ground is cold  
It and I need a rest, a deep abiding slumber  
I put in an order to Freak; a significant number

You can count on the true heads to come through  
The Super Bowl comes, and next week  
The two-bit criminals and I will pick up the clones  
Everything is getting ready to begin anew

None of this matters to the two-bit criminals  
They have been doing this all their lives  
Taught by their fathers and their uncles  
All the seasons run together - become a blur  
One day it's this way, the next day it's that way  
Go with the flow always comes down to grow  
They take it any way it comes

Between the rippers, the cops, and the buyers  
I've had enough to last me a lifetime  
Between the dispensaries, and the hydro stores  
I see a clean professional image at times  
That is not backed up by any real knowledge  
So I cast my lot with the two-bit criminals, because  
They don't pretend to be anything but what they are



John C. Krieg is a retired landscape architect and land planner who formerly practiced in Arizona, California, and Nevada. He has written a college textbook entitled *Desert Landscape Architecture* (1999, CRC Press). John has had pieces published in several journals.



"The Unlawful Arsenal of the Law"  
A political collage by Chad Lovejoy and Bob McNeil

# MONK BALLAD

Preston Taylor Stone

*"A prison wall was round us both,  
Two outcast men were we:  
The world had thrust us from its heart,  
And God from out His care:  
And the iron gin that waits for Sin  
Had caught us in its snare."*

— Oscar Wilde  
"The Ballad of Reading Gaol"

He'd caught me in the abbey late,  
a novice (Jude) and I.  
We're cleaved from each other, stripped,  
beaten, shackled outside.  
The prior (Tom) spat in my face.  
It dried there while I cried.

"What I gather from the others  
is you were caught fucking  
a novice in the abbey at dark,"  
said the abbot, laughing.  
"Torture the fags," he yelled, a chant.  
The others joined, lurking.

The Judas Cradle would be first,  
pyramid up the ass.

"Bet he likes this one," one monk said.  
"Hell yea," said Brother Cass.  
I was bound, but I would pray while  
they oiled the tip and shaft.

They come to decide Jude goes first.  
They made sure I would watch:  
they beat me till I looked, "Eyes up!"  
These men of god's debauch  
would sew to my eyes Jude's hurt,  
living there like a blotch.

He sat there for hours. They lift  
weights onto his lap till  
Jude had screamed so much his cry would  
beg to let him be killed.  
God writes his agony in blood  
down the spike, slow and skilled:

*Here lies the boy who dared to kiss  
another man in bliss.  
He will never see twenty-five,  
his parents won't know why,  
and for his lover, a monk, the  
pear that opens inside.*

Preston Taylor Stone's work has previously appeared (or is forthcoming) in *Flash Fiction Magazine*, *South Carolina Review*, *Scarlet Leaf Review*, and *Poetry Quarterly*. He is the Chief Editor of *KAIROS Literary Magazine* (kairoslit.com) and a PhD student in English at the University of Miami in Florida, US.



"A True View of Her many sides" by Bob McNeil

# OTHER ROOMS, OTHER VOICES

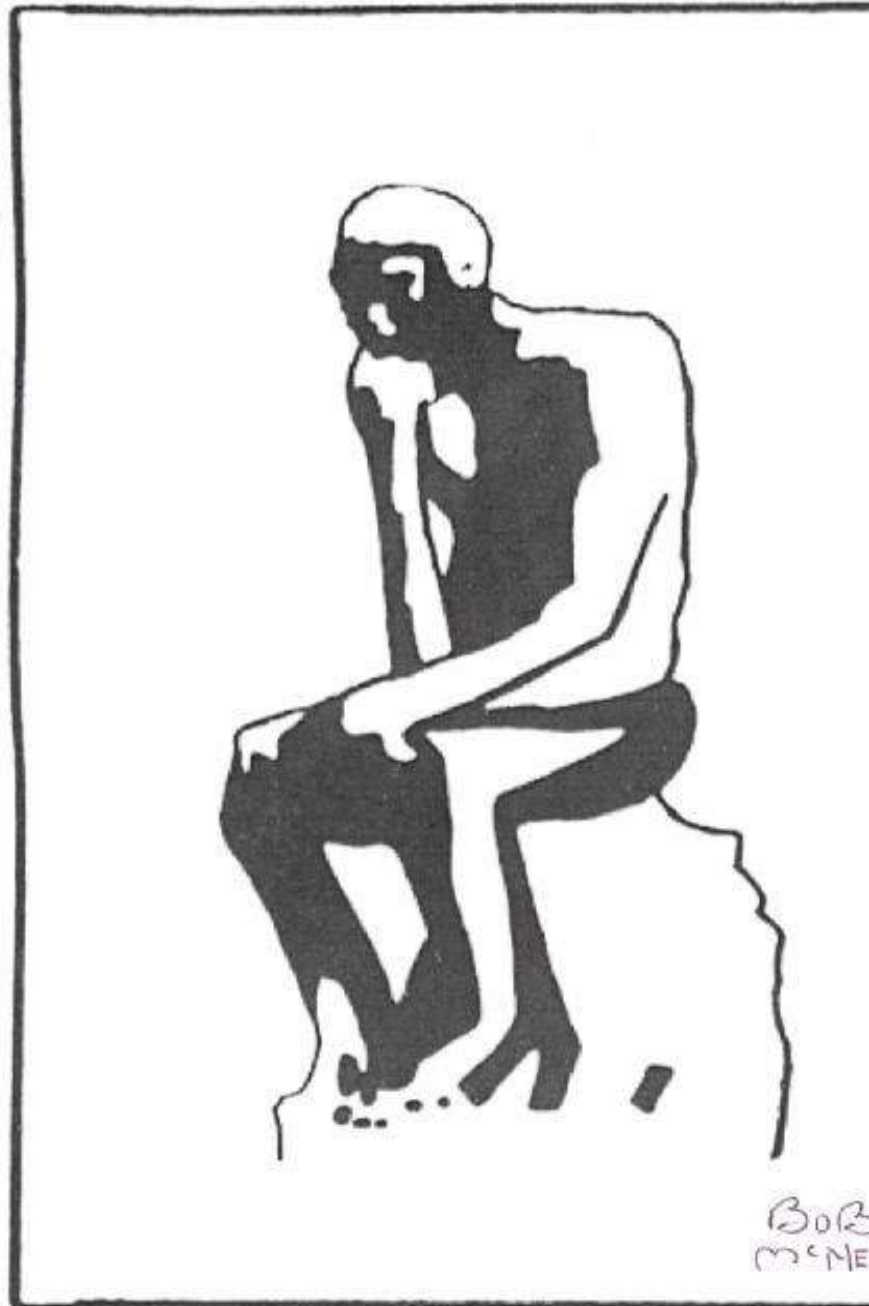
*After Truman Capote*

Preston Taylor Stone

In the closet at the top of the stairs, the door will creak open. You will feel an evacuation of air, like a cold breath spurting from the pressurized cap of an air pump. In the cool lick of the air on your forearms, a voice. You have never known voices to be simply air, cold, or in the space of that closet at the top of the stairs. The voice had waited all the time it took you to open that closet, to climb the stairs, to brave tiptoeing the house at dead-dark nighttime alone. Had you waited longer you might not have felt the cool life breathed out from the closet. And you smile because you're right on time and the shoestring-thin voice whispers confidently in your ear: "love."

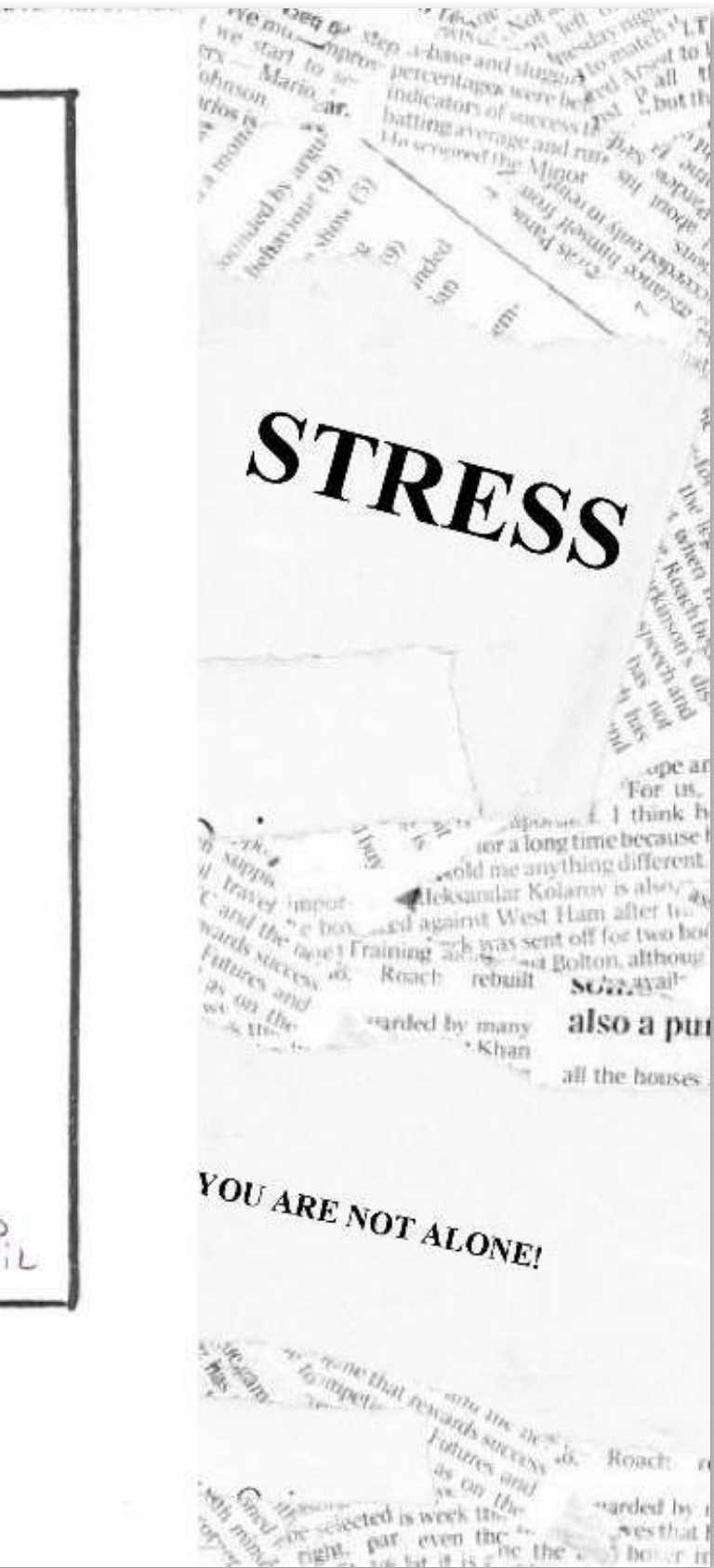


BOB



"I think, therefore I am."

--Descartes



# GESTURE

Preston Taylor Stone

I do not drink anymore but if I drank,  
I would order rum and when it came,  
the humid air would collect around  
the glass and whittle away at the ice  
in the glass until it was watered-down.  
That's how long I'd wait for you. You  
do drink and if on this day where I  
drank, you ordered, too, you would  
order a gin and soda, two limes.  
There was once no places here for us,  
even in this big sky-scraper city, even  
in the land that engineered freedom.  
There were small places—a crevice here,  
a cave there—mostly dingy places with  
more secrets than patrons, and they  
would have welcomed us if we were  
both white and paid well enough to avoid  
the gossip. If we were both white and  
I drank and you ordered after me and  
the secret place welcomed us, we might  
dance with our eyes looking from one  
to the other focus on the dilly-  
dally of the hushed lights that reflected  
in the darks of our eyes sneak a  
half-smile finish the drink and  
make eye contact again just to be sure  
get up, walk to the bathroom  
you would kiss me in the stall and  
there would be a secret then that we'd  
have to swear away to the backside of our  
skulls, deep and covered, buried. A cop  
raids it, we're done. That kiss, those  
dancing gestures we choreographed  
with our eyes at the bar that would  
welcome us and let us drink our gin  
and rum, we would have to run  
from that kiss. And we would, which  
reminds me: I do not drink anymore.

"Think, you are not alone" by Bob McNeil

# Air Guitar Eddy

First published in [Pages & Spine](#).

RICHARD LEISE

Because we didn't know his name, and he played air guitar outside Family Dollar, we called him Air Guitar Eddy. He had two dogs. We called the pit bull Pitbull, and the other, a terrier, Funky Bitch. Funky Bitch was pregnant, bursting at the seams, and she would sit and pant in the shade. Because it was Family Dollar, Air Guitar Eddy, Pitbull, and Funky Bitch didn't get much by way of charity.

Day after day Air Guitar Eddy woke up, stood by the side of the store, and performed. He only pretended to tie the ends of Pitbull and Funky Bitch's leashes to the light post.

We played in a punk band called Junk, and shared an apartment in Alpine Estates, a complex across from Family Dollar. We got our meth from Sam, who lived on the same highway, one half-mile east. Whenever forced to re-up, which was every other day, two of us would walk to the Sunoco, grab chips and a couple Cokes, spend an hour with Sam, then walk back to our apartment. We'd get high, check each other's pockets to make sure we weren't carrying, then, after looking both ways, cross the highway and get candy, Mountain Dew, and a liter of water. Two of us were nineteen, and two of us were eighteen. We were definitely punk—at least for Endwell—but we weren't into any of that gender bender stuff. But we weren't exclusive, either. No one had a bedroom. Where and who you slept with was a matter of the given day's circumstance.

Because Air Guitar Eddy was blind, we felt bad for him. He wasn't nice, he didn't want pity, so his blindness worked in our favor. We could water his dogs and he had no clue. Or, if he did, he'd say, "What the fuck you think you're doing? We live by a creek. It's insulting. If you want to do me a favor, you four can fuck off."

Sometimes, if there were only two of us, he'd say "the two of you," and, for a while, this blew our minds. Then we noted that he simply followed our conversations. We felt bad. Just because he was blind didn't mean he couldn't add. His eyes were terrible, though; we never got used to those. There were no pupils. They were incorrectly enormous, like looking at two small fish magnified by their glass bowls. He wore white jeans and a white sweatshirt.

We knew music. If broke, or if that seemed like a possibility, we played weddings and parties. Then, we billed ourselves as The Four Sails. We didn't mind, because, in its way, this was punk. And it's not like punk wasn't dead or anything, anyways. It was fun to dress up and pretend. It was like the opposite of getting high.

We knew Michael McDonald, 10cc, Ambrosia, and Toto, but we could play anything. We played a lot of instrumentals, and, when bored, during Enya's Only Time, we'd turn off our mics and mouth this game involving Van Halen or the Rolling Stones' riders.

Once, when Air Guitar Eddy was in the middle of a solo, he shouted, "Kid Gloves. Woo-hoo!"

"I don't take requests," he responded, though it was obvious, to all of us, that he was playing Rush. We clapped and cheered. The Pop Rocks fizzed in our mouths. This was our Helen Keller moment.

Funky Bitch perked up. The dogs liked us, and while they were loyal to Eddy, they weren't happy. This was a particularly hot day. We had filled bowls with water, but Eddy smelled us, or heard us, and he screamed in our direction, he wanted to know what the fuck we thought we were doing, and he poured the water on the ground. Funky Bitch, desperate, stood.

In her deep anguish, Funky Bitch took a step towards us. Eddy segued into Limelight, and we screamed, "Limelight, woo-hoo!" and we took off our shirts and whirled them around our heads.

"I already told you cunts I don't play covers," Eddy said, but he leaned into his solo, and we could see the frets, we could see the strings.

(A mom and her kids were barreling towards Family Dollar. Because Mom only hit Funky Bitch, the police weren't called. We knew though. Mom was fat, wore a black bathing suit, and rubber sandals. Her mouth was smeared red with sangria. And her kids were eating Fudgesicles.)

As we kept cheering, Funky Bitch kept walking. She didn't know the difference between Free Will and panting in the shade. Mom swung her Ram into the parking lot and clipped, more than crushed, Funky Bitch. The dog screamed. Mom parked her truck and shouted something; she grabbed her purse and the baby. Eddy fell to his knees and crawled towards Funky Bitch.

There was nothing we could do. Eddy prayed. What he said was not meant to be heard. He was crying. We talked about that later, how his eyes were still useful for something.

The woman exited the store with four pool noodles. One was blue, one was green, one was yellow, and one was pink. Her kids started fighting. She plopped the baby in its car seat.

"Hey lady," we said. "You just killed this dude's dog."

"Like hell," Mom said. "He's lucky. Good thing I was paying attention, or I would have hit him." Her kids quieted. Blood drained from the dog's ears.

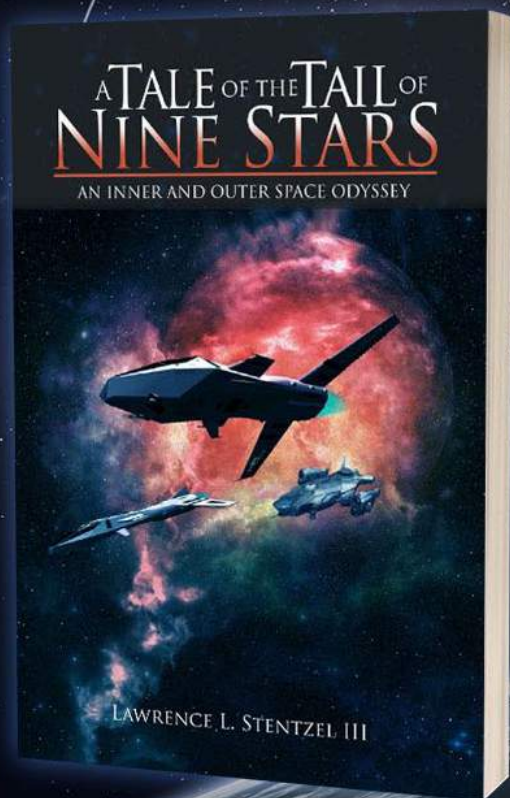
"How long you going to stay drunk?" we said. "There's a camera up there," we pointed. "We called the cops. I wouldn't hit and run."

"No, you didn't," the woman said. "And another thing," she put her car in reverse, she slowed as she neared us. "I don't want to see you junkies here, neither. This is a family store." Then she went on her way, opening an ice-cream sandwich, and her face was no longer downcast.

That night we wrote a song about Eddy. It goes like this

Richard Leise recently accepted The Perry Morgan Fellowship in Creative Writing from Old Dominion University. While completing a MFA, he has a novel out on submission, and is finishing a collection of short stories. His work may be found in numerous publications, and was recently awarded Pushcart Prize and Best Small Fictions nominations.





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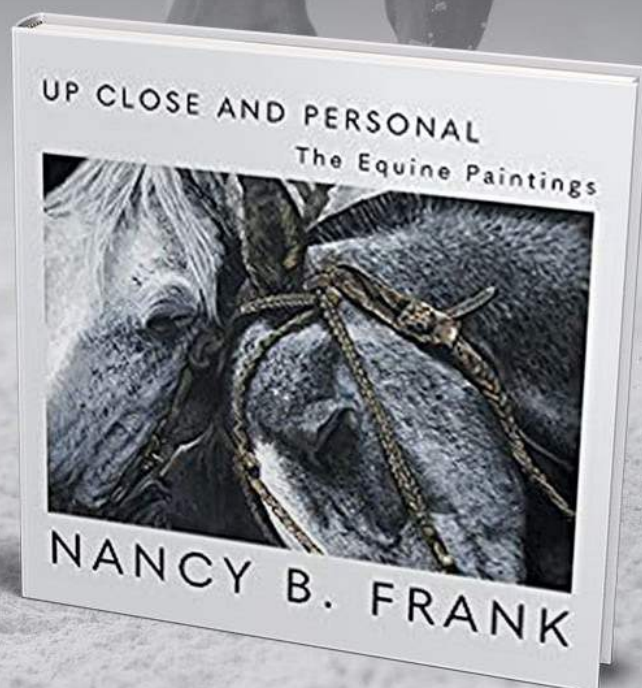
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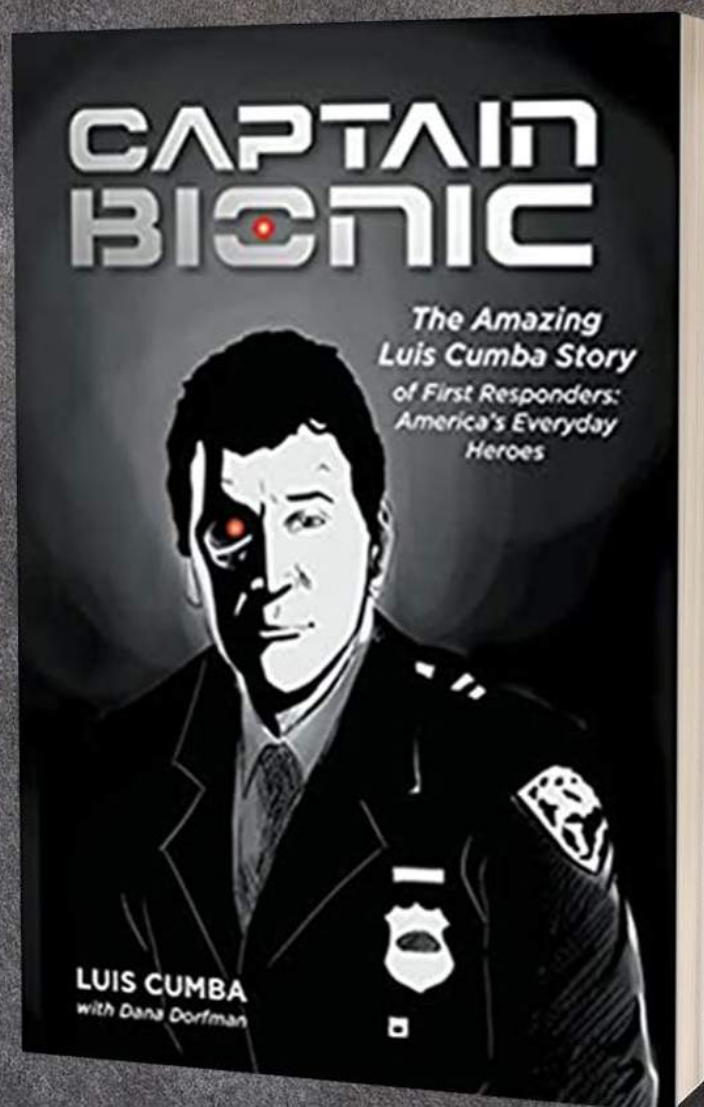
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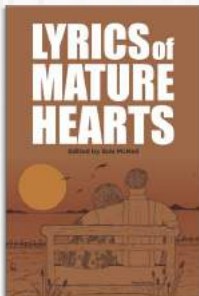
New Reader Media, a creative marketing firm working in partnership with New Reader Magazine, takes on the challenge of bookmarking emerging voices in the indie publishing world. Presented in no particular order, here's New Reader Media's reading list for this quarter of 2020!



## **Gone Viking**

BILL ARNETT

From a bestselling author, poet, and musician comes a literary treat set to take its readers on a journey right on their reading chairs. Filled with adventure, history, and unforced hilarity, this book is highly recommended for anyone craving for a good time.



## **Lyrics of Mature Hearts**

GORDON P. BOIS, BOB MCNEIL

A beautiful collection about the bittersweet backdrop of one's adult years. It houses subjects as familiar as they are personal, like fear, longing, and gratefulness, accompanied by stunningly apt illustrations by George Juan Vivo. A touching read for all ages.



## Got No Reason to Believe: Christianity's Failure to Prove Its Case

ORVAL D. STRONG

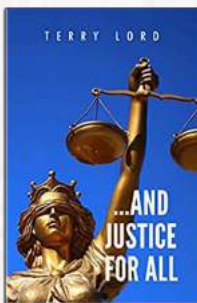
A thought-provoking analysis of the failure of Christianity as a religion: told from the perspective of a veteran who once was a vocal believer, and now wants to undo the damage as an atheist.



## Maelstrom

PAUL HUWILER

Stonefield Sherriff Ian Henderson is growing increasingly wary over the series of events and appearances of suspicious people in town, set off by Rudy Cox's brutal death. Read as Henderson slowly unravels a maelstrom of crime in this thrilling mystery.



## ...And Justice for All: Life as a Federal Prosecutor Upholding the Rule of Law

TERRY LORD

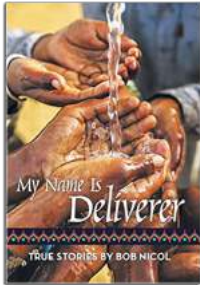
This memoir tells of justice through the eyes of a man who rose from humble beginnings and into the world of law enforcement. There is more than meets the eye in the criminal justice system, and Terry Lord gives an honest depiction of what it truly is like.



## The Road to Righteousness

A. BOAZ HELSING

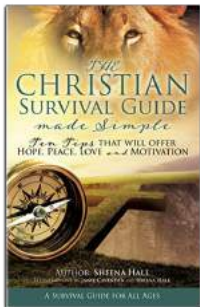
This detailed exposition of the book of Romans explores the difference between what is righteous by law, and what is righteous by faith. A must-read for truth-seekers and believers.



## My Name Is Deliverer

BOB NICOL

Bob shares his harrowing experiences around the globe and whether he was fighting for survival. Join him as he treks through some of the most perplexing predicaments and discovers some of the most astounding spiritual solutions.



## The Christian Survival Guide Made Simple: Ten Tips That Will Offer Hope, Peace, Love and Motivation

SHEENA HALL

A timely book if you want to get a jump start on becoming a Christian Warrior. It provides answers to some of the questions we ask ourselves everyday, and features Survival Tips that will definitely have a deep impact on your thoughts and perceptions on life's different scenarios.



## The Writings

JOEL DAVID RINKER

This methodically laid-out collection of significant writings is designed to make any reader reflect on life and its many issues. The Godly vision portrayed in the book teaches readers to find hope in the midst of it all.



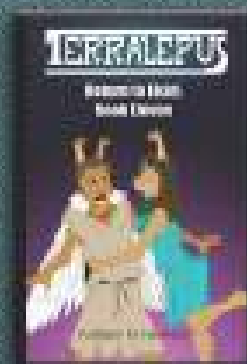
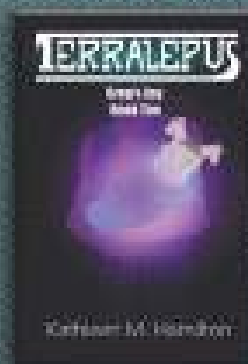
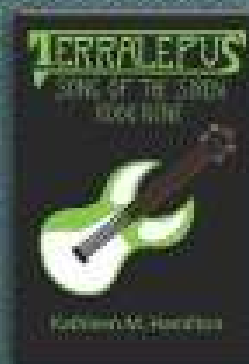
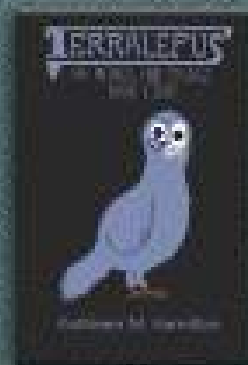
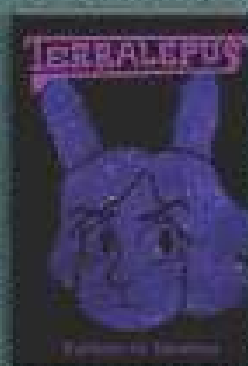
## Poof!

LEONARD ARCHIE WILSON

About 16 years ago, the author underwent open heart surgery. It was successful. But while he was unconscious, he had the first of many vivid dreams he was to have over the next 14 years. This is a collection of those dreams. Any reader is surely in for a ride.

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