

The
MANTELPIECE

Issue 8

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February 2024





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The Work of Art in the Age of Artificial Imitation

At the zenith of the 20th century, amidst the tumult of technological and political upheaval, Walter Benjamin, a philosopher and cultural critic, composed his seminal essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” Written in 1935, this essay delves into the profound impact of mass production technologies on the nature and perception of art. Benjamin’s insights into how these technologies, particularly photography and film, not only altered the methods of art reproduction but also transformed the societal role and intrinsic value of art, continue to resonate in contemporary discourse. His exploration of concepts such as the ‘aura’ of artworks and their politicization under new modes of production provides a foundational framework for understanding the evolution of art in response to technological innovation. As we now grapple with the burgeoning influence of artificial intelligence in the realm of artistic creation, revisiting and recontextualizing Benjamin’s thoughts becomes a crucial endeavor in comprehending the ongoing metamorphosis of art in the digital and post-digital age.

In an epoch defined by the rapid evolution of artificial intelligence, the contours of art production and reception undergo a metamorphosis as profound as the seismic shifts wrought by the mechanical reproduction technologies of the early 20th century. In this contemplation, I seek to unravel how artificial intelligence reconfigures the very essence of art, challenging and redefining notions of creativity, originality, and the role of the human artist.

At the heart of this transformation lies the concept of artificial imitation. Much like the mechanical reproduction of yesteryears, artificial intelligence does not merely replicate; it simulates, synthesizes, and, in a startling act of autonomy, creates. This phenomenon disrupts the traditional dialectic of art creation, where the singular vision of the artist and the uniqueness of the artwork held sway.

The advent of AI-generated art prompts a reconsideration of Walter Benjamin’s ‘aura’ – the unique, unrepeatable presence of a work of art. In an age where algorithms can generate art ad infinitum, does the aura not only diminish but dissolve entirely?

Artificial intelligence, in its algorithmic precision and capacity for infinite replication, seems to render the human artist an anachronism. Yet, it is essential to recognize that AI, in its current incarnation, operates within the parameters defined by human ingenuity. It learns from existing art, drawing upon the vast expanses of human creativity to create something ostensibly ‘new’. This raises a pivotal question: Can AI transcend the role of the imitator to become a creator in its own right, or is it eternally bound to the creative legacies of its human progenitors?

“Yet, in this brave new world, one must not lose sight of the human element.”

Furthermore, the democratization of art production through AI tools heralds a new era of accessibility and participation. The exclusivity of artistic creation, once the preserve of the trained or the gifted, is being challenged. Art becomes more communal, a shared language that transcends professional boundaries. This democratization, however, is not without its caveats. As art becomes increasingly algorithm-driven, do we risk homogenization of creativity? Do these tools enhance human creativity, or do they usher in an era of artistic redundancy?

Politically, the role of AI in art production carries significant implications. Just as Benjamin noted the aestheticization of politics in fascism and the politicization of art in com-

munist, one must ponder how AI influences the interplay between art and power. In an age where information is currency, the control and use of AI in art production becomes a politically charged act. Does AI democratize artistic expression, or does it concentrate power in the hands of those who control the technology?

In considering the function of art in the age of artificial imitation, one must also confront the ethical implications. The blurring lines between human and machine-generated art raise questions of authorship, originality, and intellectual property. What does it mean to be an artist in an age where an algorithm can produce works indistinguishable from, or even superior to, human creations?

The age of artificial imitation beckons a re-evaluation of art’s essence, much as the advent of mechanical reproduction did in Benjamin’s time. The aura of art, once rooted in its singularity and connection to the creator, now flutters in the elusive winds of algorithmic outputs. This era challenges the notion of the artist as a solitary genius, replacing it with a collaborative dance between human and machine.

Yet, in this brave new world, one must not lose sight of the human element. Art, in its most profound sense, is a reflection of the human condition, an expression of our deepest fears, hopes, and desires. The touch of the human hand, the stroke of the human spirit, must not be rendered obsolete by the cold precision of algorithms. The challenge, then, is to find a symbiosis where AI becomes an extension of human creativity, not its replacement.

As we stand at the crossroads of this new epoch, we must navigate with caution, embracing the possibilities of AI in art while safeguarding the irreplaceable value of human creativity. In doing so, we can ensure that art remains a vibrant, evolving dialogue between humanity and technology, reflecting the ever-changing tapestry of our existence. □ *L.H.*

The Sea's Placid Sister

E. R. Murray



Here I am: mood-heavy, alone. Crouched at the edge of the lake, feet drenched in dew, I feel pressures blur bluish like the mist. I try to hear what the lake has to say because others have said that's what I should do. I'm quietly hoping to connect to Thoreau's 'most beautiful and expressive' ideal, 'looking into which the beholder measures the depth of his own nature' (*Walden*).

Light on the surface is visible in slithers; slices of brightness in the cloaking, vaporous haze. A bushel of reeds silhouetted, their rustle a comfort, reminds how time continues to move in such stillness. People come to the lake for peace, to stare and listen, hear the hush of autumn grass, the slap against water as a single fish leaps, gone in a breath, unseen.

But the stillness doesn't speak; my ears are chilled from wind, my forearms too, and I pull my sleeves down as a comfort, a closure. The lake feels like the sea's placid sister; the quiet one, the stay-at-home one, the don't-stick-your-head-above-water one, the keep your mouth shut one, the suffer-in-silence one. The one that took an easier route.

A breath of wind sends a ripple towards me. Gently, at first, but quickly spreading. The mist rises but the pressures do not.

Surrounding reeds strengthen their voices
 a choir of trees shake free their leaves in rallied support.
 A distant poacher's gunshot rings out from the left shore
 echoes on the right, in single, strong repeat.

I watch red leaves falling to grass
 graceful dive of a guillemot
 clumsy splash of landing mallards
 unexpected whirligig of dragonflies mating
 hasn't the season passed?

All these things I observe, and I hear more leaves calling skyward. But nothing tells me about me, or improves my mood. Have I failed the lake or has the lake failed me?

The Quiet One

Could loneliness be the worst state of being? People often confuse solitude with loneliness, but many of us have never felt lonelier than in a relationship or a room full of people – especially people we know. I grew up in a home that was neither safe nor

nurturing, and so I tried to spend as much time away from there as possible and I grew to love the comfort of difference, chance, and strangers – but also solitude. To the point where it was difficult to tell the difference between being alone and lonely and I had to navigate this strange space with the heart of an adventurer. I also developed a disagreeable relationship with South Bank, the council estate where I grew up. For a long time, I blamed the locality for an abusive childhood, rather than my own particular circumstances. It took until my forties to truly understand that my own family circumstances were specific, hidden, unvoiced. That very few childhood friends knew about my home life because I did not speak about what was happening. As a result, it impossible to recall any true sense of having once belonged to that silenced place.

The Stay-At-Home One

Thankfully, I found a home in education, poetry, and art. Education provided a potential way out, while art and poetry enabled escape and dreaming, as well as a way to process the world. Together, these interests allowed me to determine my own outcomes.

Poetry spoke intimately to me from a young age, and I loved poems of earth and solitude and the supernatural. I memorised sections of *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, and *The Iliad* and would recite them to myself whenever I needed to calm. The poets I loved were men because that was all that was presented. My access to books was limited to the small local library, and even there, male poets were all that I could find and, like most women, it didn't occur to me to mind until I matured into teenage years. Edgar Allen Poe was a particular childhood favourite, especially his poem, *The Lake*. 'So lovely was the loneliness of a wild lake', he claimed. But only as a concept for youth; in later years, the lake held terror for Poe, not just comfort. His words in that poem cover the true breadth and depths of loneliness – anyone who has been there would know not to fear it fully.

Most of my writing and drawing took place outdoors. Rambling disused railway lines awash with nettles, foxgloves, and cuckoo spit, became my sanctuary, along with overgrown wastelands fractured with becks. I would marvel at the array of weeds pushing through concrete and sneaking between corrugated iron and I would think, that could be me. I could live here. Though nowhere felt as true and homely as the sea. There was no such thing as holidays back then, but we took day-trips to Whitby, with its crashing shoreline. This was where I felt most relaxed. I remember thinking that no-one could feel scared or lonely or sad to the sound of waves. I think it often to this day.

The Don't-Stick-Your-Head-Above-Water One

Art provided more of a female profile, and Frieda Kahlo's *What the Water Gave Me* was a painting I returned to regularly. I didn't get the opportunity to step inside an art gallery until I went to university, but my school had a decent stock of art anthologies and coffee table books and delving inside felt like a

wild and liberating journey. On my papery travels, it was Frida that captured my attention. On every return visit, I would discover something different, another layer, and I tried to emulate her work with bathtubs of my own.

The contents would change with age, mood and circumstance. Over the years, objects included artist brushes, wild flowers, Egyptian masks, maps, ice-cream, mountains, books, and the sea. Also, cheap cider, a cassette of Nine Inch Nails, various tattoo designs, and many shades of blue. I don't remember what was included at what age; like Kahlo's original, my memory swims in the layers. But I vividly remember that staring at her bathtub, those judgemental male glares, the strangled woman, the dead bird, the volcano consuming a building, I felt the suffocation of overcrowding. It was as though the painting was trying to warn me of the anguish created by familiarity.

This painting gave me a strong desire to escape mentally, and also physically, from the childhood card I had been dealt. It made me long for a life that felt free, rather than trapped. My way out was education, but the inspiration was art and nature. In the Ophelia-like figure, floating while being slowly strangled, I read a deep message: dangers lie in staying static.

The Keep Your Mouth Shut One

My path was full of characters and relationships, but they were mainly turbulent and fleeting. The truth is, since I left my hometown, solitude has been my most reliable companion. I found that I had to cut ties to be fully free, but I soon learned that improving your life through education means not just gaining, but also losing, certain aspects of yourself.

You're not actually aware of that price as you fight and strive, however. It's only once you achieve an element of positive change that you realise how difficult it is to go back, even fleetingly. You try to connect back with people from your past, but the conversation stays locked in a time that you've spent your life trying to leave behind. You cannot say what's really in your heart because you have nothing good to say about the place where that person still lives and they are a good person so you don't want to offend.

Soon, the conversation dries up and so does your need to try and reconnect. Due to actions and decisions of your own making, your current path and the one mapped out for you in childhood have diverged too strongly. Think of a trail split on a woodland walk: you can take the sunnier, upward path or the darker, creepy-looking downward path. Whichever you choose, you know that your decision will change your walk irrevocably, and that your unconscious will vibrate with the faint echoes of longing for the unknown. Though you may not feel the effects until later.

The Suffer-In-Silence One

Like Poe's poem, my understanding of many feelings and beliefs linked to my past have changed. The lack of family support had always seemed freeing, but trying to integrate into the family of someone close remains problematic to this day because the dynamics often elude me. Likewise, friendship groups in large

Two Haiku Sonnets

Wally Swist

the chill in learning
of a friend's imminent death—
autumn equinox

early autumn—
conkers falling amid the stillness
of prayer flags

the thinned bracken
gone purple with asters...
revealing the deer run

emerging out of itself...
the heron's broad wings
rising upriver

bright October morning:
timothy's sparkling inflorescence

breaking the quiet,
a pattering on the screen—
early morning rain

tall stands
of joe pye weed leaning in the thicket...
a cricket's ratchet

amid September's falling leaves
...kingbird fluttering up
to catch flies

morning coolness—
drops of dew sparkling over
a freshly hayed meadow

pigweed fluff floating
through gorse and bracken

numbers, with fallouts and shifting allegiances as a natural part of the dynamic, leave me baffled. The periphery is always where I seem to stand and as my life has improved and morphed into one that I dreamed of as a child, I no longer know whether it is preference or necessity that keeps me moving into these unreachable, unidentifiable spaces. Always hovering closer to being alone, even when the room is crowded.

I live in rural Ireland now, in comfort and safety, yet as I walk the country lanes for hours on end, just a notebook for company, I continue to seek out those magical, errant weeds that entranced me in pavement cracks as a child. A sense of cohesion with familiarity and routine seems such a precious thing, and for many, so easy. The contented mind I crave feels closest while in the natural world or creating, but must I resign myself to the fact that contentedness will always elude me?

Friction, unease, and unrest are more familiar companions, because just like the force and drive of the sea, it is challenge and change that powers me. And so, I seek comfort in difference, keeping my writing as a close companion as I try to make sense of the world in words.

That is what brings me to the lake.

And the lake is what brings me to the greatest challenge of all: truth.

This lake is not my place, I decide. Me, I like the ocean; the dash of it, the violence, the danger and melodrama, the uncertain currents, the ever-changing tide. My place is the angry place, the wild place, the place of motion, results and ideas, conflict and resolution. Of waves and swells and crashing storms that batter the Fastnet Lighthouse one minute and lull it the next. My feelings do not reflect in the stillness, in the calm.

Like Anais Nin, it seems 'I have no fear of depths but a great fear of shallow living' (*The Four-Chambered Heart*). The sea is where I stop thinking about self and allow the world to wash over me. Silence irks and magnifies without resolution. And yet, without the lake, did I realise that I was lonely? It is, perhaps, easy to hide within change and motion.

As I watch another ripple spread lake-wide, the wind picks up, and the trees build to roaring. I remember:

there is movement in the undergrowth
light inside shadow
sound in the silence
if you only care to notice.

The lake, the sea, they cannot fail us, we can only fail ourselves and each other. So, I remain still and listen carefully to;

the stay-at-home one
the don't-stick-your-head-above-water one
the keep your mouth shut one
the suffer-in-silence one.

Placid sisters have voices too, if we let them in.
For no route is ever linear or easy. □

The Other Half

Lilian D. Vercauteren



Photo: Aby / Adobe Stock

Weeks after accepting the job, Trevor Harrogate puts his belongings in boxes, drives from New York City to Rocky Springs, New Mexico and settles in, deep in the desert. Before his arrival, Rent-a-Car outfitted a pre-owned travel trailer behind the office and now, during the long nights, instead of the city's constant thrum interrupted by blaring sirens, he listens to coyotes calling, an owl's lonesome vigil, monsoons stirring awake.

Why would anyone open a car rental place in the middle of nowhere, in a town nobody had ever heard of? Trevor had wondered during the drive down. But it'd been six months and he saw a fair share of customers: locals with broken down pickups the day before county fair, young families in need of a solid sedan to visit out-of-state relatives and once, a group of stranded Chinese tourists. After they rented all five Toyotas he had in stock, he directed them to Jade Palace, down on Main, but possibly

they thought he was talking about a brothel because they looked downright confused, and Trevor said yes when they asked him to pose for a picture, outside with the dinosaur. He didn't know why there was a life-size blow-up T-Rex; he'd found it in the storage shed with step by step instructions how to put it up. Anyway, it was a big hit with the tourists and that was good enough.

At the front desk, Trevor checks the day's reservations. Mr. Johnson, from the hardware store, is due in. He requested his usual, so Trevor detailed the Pathfinder yesterday, found a balled up receipt on the floorboard and a sliver of a candy bar wrapper between the seats, sprayed the interior with Snowy Emerald Pine and parked it up front. He taps his pen on the counter, and stares out across Route 86. The Rent-a-Car in Rocky Springs is the company's smallest—and least profitable—location. But when the one-man operated

branch came up short a manager, he'd immediately volunteered.

"You sure?" His supervisor, Frank DeLuca, had leaned on his desk. DeLuca was born and raised in Little Italy, never left the city, his accent as thick as the hair on his chest. "You're in accounting."

"So, the books will be solid."

DeLuca—visibly confused—had looked Trevor up and down. Trevor could see on his face the moment he put it together, hoping he wouldn't say it out loud, but DeLuca wasn't known for his tact. "You doing this because of your wife?"

DeLuca's stupidity irked him. *None of your business*, he wanted to say. Last year, Julia died in an airplane crash. Trevor had tried to keep everything the same, to keep steady while the world swayed. He rattled around in their comfortless Brooklyn apartment, listened for the sound of her keys clattering against the lock, but only the city loomed on the other side of the door. At times he didn't even recognize the streets anymore, because she wasn't out there, on her way home. To DeLuca Trevor had shrugged with the studied nonchalance of a B-rated tv actor, as if he had grown bored with the subs and sodas at the local bodegas and was simply looking to expand his palate, instead of uprooting his entire life so he didn't have to go to those same bodegas and see her reflection in every store window, Julia waiting at the crosswalk, Julia in line at the bookstore, Julia in the park. How could he explain that New York was too big for him now? Rocky Springs had no gyms or movie theaters where he'd be constantly looking for her. No, Rocky Springs, New Mexico had sounded just right.

He unwraps a peanut butter sandwich as the door jingles.

"Mr. Johnson, welcome back."

The storekeeper, in his usual uniform of khakis, a collared shirt with sweater vest—no matter the triple digits temperatures

outside—shuffles to the counter. For the next hour Trevor knows he'll be listening to a month's worth of minute hardware store—and beyond—happenings. From missing orders Mr. Johnson swears he placed, to suspicious holes in the ground and even more suspicious lights in the night sky, to his wife's cousin's husband so and so who won't eat any potatoes and now look at the state of him. If New Yorkers were easy to recognise by their slight jadedness mixed with a nonchalant fashion sense, stubborn pride and fast walking pace, Mr. Johnson was a true desert dweller. His essence, looks included, was instilled with a slow, warm dustiness—not to be confused with dullness—like he and the desert were kindred and he had let it seep in as part of him, and happily so.

The sun gleams on the roofs of the cars waiting in the lot. In the distance, a dust devil twirls before dissolving into the hazy mountains. An eighteen wheeler, probably took a wrong turn somewhere, barrels by and leaves a sepia veil behind, until that too, dissolves and the sky emerges—blue again. Trevor tries not to think too often of his life before things fell apart. Before her airplane fell out of the sky and hit the earth, which meant she left Earth, ironically. She came down, but went up to heaven. What a stupid thing to think, and yet, he smiles a little. Julia would've rolled her eyes. He isn't even sure he believes in heaven. He does believe in bad luck and swore to never set foot on a plane again, which is fine, because where would he go?

"You married?" Mr. Johnson has come up for air after articulating the pros and cons of buckshot versus slugs and produces a handkerchief to wipe his nose.

"No." Trevor offers him half of the sandwich, not entirely altruistically, hoping the peanut butter might slow down the man's jaws enough to stop talking. Mr. Johnson accepts and moves on to discourse the case of the stuck washer, while Trevor's gaze is caught by something else outside.

A large green and brown shape is moving across the car lot and for a split second it's a surreal view: over Mr. Johnson's right shoulder the Rent-a-Car blow-up dinosaur hobbles beyond the gravel and heads straight for Nena's Hair and Nail Parlor, as if it's going for a pedicure. The rope is slipping before a gust of wind sweeps it upside down and hurtles it into the sky.

Trevor drops his uneaten sandwich,

motions to Mr. Johnson to wait, who keeps chattering anyway, and dashes for the door.

Mr. Johnson realizes his one man audience has disappeared and turns around in time to see Trevor burst onto the road in pursuit of a life-sized airborne T-Rex.

He sprints around the corner at Nena's and onto Old Springs. The dinosaur lies in the middle of the road in front of TJ's Electrics, half deflated like a discarded plastic bag. With a sigh of relief Trevor bends down to gather up the rope, when the wind jerks it back into motion, and sends it rolling like a tumbleweed. He sets off after it again, almost catches hold this time, but the wind plays a game now; it lifts the bulk of the body, bounces it off a car to launch it headfirst into a great big leap. It flops down hard, dented head over heels, drags across the pavement and careers further down the street, as if it's scrambling to catch a bus. The wind picks up, more resolutely this time, cooling the sweat on Trevor's back – and at last, hightails the dinosaur up into the open sky.

"Dammit!"

"Trevor?" A woman's voice behind him says. Nena had stepped out of her shop. "You alright?"

Trevor catches his breath and motions above him.

Nena squints into the sun. "Aww, is that the dinosaur?"

They watch as it floats higher and higher, looking insignificant like it didn't take half a day to fill with air, turn it right side up, wrestle it out the shed and tether it down at the edge of the lot. "Eventually it might come down again," she offers. "Right?"

Or maybe it will keep going up forever, refusing to return to earth, Trevor thinks.

The wind ruffles his clothes, tugging at them like a sail as if it doesn't know his feet are heavy in the desert soil. But the dinosaur, unbound, wanders higher, until it's a dot in the pale nothingness.

"I liked that thing."

"Maybe your wife will like it too," Nena shields her eyes from the glare. "It's a small town, Trevor," she adds when Trevor gives her a blank look. "Everybody knows. You want some prickly pear ice tea? It's a scorcher."

He pushes his breath against the pang in his chest he knows isn't from running across half the town after the damn dinosaur. The grit that was left of his heart had settled in the past months, but sometimes, for seemingly

no reason at all, the dirt and rocks get stirred and bang around his chest as if it must grind his insides down to a dry pulp. He wants nothing more than to turn away, back to the rental office, but she walks ahead of him and the moment to decline has passed. So he follows her inside Nena's Hair and Nail Parlor.

The place is a chromatic cocktail of nail polish remover, perfumes, the sound of a scratchy radio and women chattering. A wobbly fan blows metallic foil streamers.

"Oh, hi, Trevor," Mrs. Johnson sits closest to the door, her fingers fanned out atop a small bench, with nails in a hard-to-miss purple. "Did Marlon drop by to get the car?"

"He did. As a matter of fact, he's waiting for me right now... I should probably head back."

"Let the old bugger wait," she waves. "It gives all of us a break." She gives a meaningful look to the two other ladies, Mrs. Johnson's friends, Trevor assumes, giggling in agreement.

"That husband of yours sure doesn't know when to shut it," one of the women makes a zipping motion across her mouth. Like the friend next to her, her feet are soaking in a tub of foamy water but her head is also covered by many pieces of aluminum foil. Nena appears with a tray of glasses filled to the brim with ice and a pink liquid.

"The dinosaur blew away," she says to the room. "Trevor tried to catch it, but the wind took it," she hands him a glass.

"Oh, that's a shame," Mrs. Johnson tuts. "The grandchildren loved him."

"I know, everybody did," Nena says.

"Will you get a new one?" Foil Lady asks.

The drink is cold and sweet. He swirls the glass, the ice ticks, crackling quietly. Drops of condensation pool in his palm. There is the rock of guilt, because nothing inside the beauty shop tethers him to Julia, that wasn't her thing. But the gravel dilutes, the chest crushing sensation softens, dissolving in an acetone soaked parallel universe.

"It was a real eye catcher," Nena nods.

And maybe the chemicals in the room are getting to his head, but Trevor smiles. "It really was," he says.

Across the street, at the country's smallest Rent-a-Car—recently short a dinosaur—Mr. Johnson stands at the counter, eating the other half of Trevor's peanut butter sandwich. □

Querida

Addy Evenson



Illustration: MG / Adobe Stock

“I heard you dancing with the specters last night,” Abuela said.
Adelina stared.

They sat at a wooden, round table and ate shredded wheat and cream. In the cream Abuela placed strawberries, sugared peaches, and almonds.

“No,” Adelina said.

“I saw your slippers worn to shreds in the morning.”

“I thought it was a dream.”

“Did you see him?”

“He doesn’t visit me anymore.”

“Maybe his spirit flew to a better place.”

“I don’t like to think about that.”

Outside, parrots gathered on the telephone wires, singing *Cielito Lindo*. After breakfast, Adelina went on the lawn and stood in the birds of paradise beneath the pink bougainvillea tree. Humid wind dizzied the turquoise chimes that hung over the patio. “*Canta y no llores,*” the parrots sang.

A black BMW turned down the road, and a tall man stepped out of it.

Adelina collapsed on the grass.

The canary yellow house on Greenwood Lane was built by a vaquero. It was not made of the traditional adobe or terracotta

of most California ranch houses, but rather the wood paneling and shutters used in colder climates. The vaquero built the house for a woman who would never be his wife.

He met the schoolteacher in a shipwreck on the red coast of Prince Edward Island. She pulled his cold body up to shore and fed him oysters with brandy.

“Let me go to America. After I have made my way I will send for you,” the vaquero said.

“I do not want to leave my home,” the schoolteacher said. “The women in my family are cursed. If they ever try to leave the island, they die. I will remain in this house for my entire life, as my mother did, and her mother before her.”

“That is superstition. I will build a home exactly like yours, down to the piano bench. In California we have rolling hills of citrus and avocado trees. I will show you how to make tamales. These are heaven prepared in corn husks. You will never be cold, and you will not have to plow snow. California is a place of gold, warmth, and possibility.”

The schoolteacher traveled across the sea to marry the vaquero, but died of consumption before she could ever set foot in America. Years passed, and the vaquero took a wife of convenience. He spent the rest of his life drinking and sleeping in brothels. He became known throughout the town as a singer of *rancheras*, and a drunk. When he died, he was set to sea in a boat with a cigar and brandy, and lit on fire. This was called a Viking’s funeral, and although he had no Nordic blood, the vaquero had requested this burial himself. One generation later, the house was supplanted from the avocado orchards and placed in town by the vaquero’s son, Ernesto Castelán.

Ernesto’s wife Yvelia lamented living miles away from good society. She told her

husband that if he did not move her closer to the city, she would leave him for a wealthy patrón.

This reason was only a pretense. Yvelia truthfully despised the yellow house, but knew it would be improper to admit this to her husband. She did not like the way that the floorboards creaked as though they were crying with the sobs of the vaquero. Downstairs, there was a malicious green door with no knob. Every time she tried to open the door, she found it stuck fast. She thought that one time she could hear laughter on the other side of it. And it seemed like even when the children slept, she could hear the patter of feet rustling through nightdresses upstairs.

“*Son solo palomas*,” Ernesto said.

He refused to leave the home his father built from his “*sangre, sudor y lágrimas*.”

The dispute with Yvelia lasted three years, until Ernesto grew so tired of sleeping on the fainting couch that he hired workers to move the house into town with his wife and children still inside it. In the morning, Yvelia looked out the window and screamed.

“Where is my garden,” she cried. “Where is my orchard?”

“Now you can be in good society,” Ernesto said.

The man approached Adelina and picked up her body from the lawn. He held one of his hands under her tailbone and draped her shoulder blades over his arm. Her head fell back, and her curls fell to the cement. He carried her through the open doorway of the canary yellow house and set her on the table.

“You,” Abuela said. “Have you no shame?”

“She needs ice,” he said.

“My son would have choice words to say to you.”

“My friend is no longer with us. Ice. She needs ice.”

Adelina Castelán was twenty-seven, but still had the appearance of a sixteen-year-old. Neighbors believed that Adelina’s mother, a Norwegian witch, had swallowed an elixir during her pregnancy to give the child an eternal adolescence.

“Nonsense,” Abuela said. “Adelina’s

father was simply too overbearing to allow her to grow up.”

Adelina’s face, body, and spontaneous gestures never passed the stage of first youth. But there was an ancient quality about her dark eyes that made delivery boys, taxi drivers, and ministers stop and linger. A few of them, caught in those onyx pools, never retrieved their senses. They spent days lurking in the foliage outside the canary yellow house, till Abuela chased them off with a defective pistol.

Adelina spent most of her time writing stories, “imagining,” in the tall grass, or dancing in the attic with the spirits. She gardened and cut fabrics for Abuela.

Once, Adelina worked in fast food. When she tried to wrap the hamburgers in paper, her hands shook. She fell to the floor in a violent paroxysm and was released forever from the monotonous cruelty of honest labor.

The man standing over her body at the table had a beautiful name that could only be understood by Adelina herself. It was a language that was spoken by mystics in the ancient world. The language had died many years ago. To human ears his name sounded like two long, exquisite notes on violin strings.

People called him Tarek.

Tarek was born in Cairo and raised in Paris. Adelina had known him since she was ten. He was twenty-five then, and married to his first wife. He had violet eyes, and dark hair that fell in curls around his harsh jawline.

He spent years in the sitting room with the Castelán family, having Turkish coffee and *shisha*, and talking with her father about ideas. Sometimes these ideas looked like women. Whenever he fell in love with a new idea, it distressed him to the point of feverishness. Adelina would laugh in his face with the mercilessness that only children possess.

Tarek was kind to her, and bought her rosewater ice cream, and took her for rides in his car. Soon she called him “My Favorite,” and was inseparable from him. Her father indulged this innocent obsession, and advised Tarek to take her out on her sixteenth birthday. Across from her at the restaurant table, Tarek talked to Adelina as if

she was grown up. He told her that the way she looked into the eyes of others meant that she would have an auspicious life.

“Listening,” he explained, “is a rare trait in a human being.”

Tarek had decided to move to Egypt to fly airplanes that carried people over the Arabian Sea. He explained to Adelina that his passions were not for money or materialism but for the complexities of the gears and mechanisms in the cockpit of the plane. That night he dropped her off at the canary yellow house. She crossed the threshold in a strange fever. The way that Tarek looked made her feel like she had swallowed a moonstone. There in her body the moonstone secreted all of its light. She tried to forget it, but in the morning her bedding had fallen to the floor.

Abuela entered the room, and picked up the crumpled white sheets.

“Are you in love,” she asked.

“Never,” Adelina said.

Adelina did not open her bedroom door the entire summer. She slept on the slanted roof outside and looked at the starless sky. She had no need to relieve herself, or to eat, or drink water. Love sustained her. No one could coax her to join other human beings until the day that her father opened the door and said,

“Tarek will return to his home country soon. He needs your help.”

“I don’t care.”

“He is in love with a woman who has taken ill. She is married to a tyrant. She grew up with Tarek. When she chose to marry the tyrant, he broke his hands. That was years ago, of course. Now, he is trying to win her from her husband. But the husband does not like it. He has decided to hold her daughter hostage.”

“I am sixteen,” Adelina said. “What can I do about it?”

“You will go with him to the jewelry store.”

“What good will that do?”

“He says you will bring him luck.”

Adelina dressed herself in the black dress she wore to Abuelo’s funeral. She brushed her hair behind her ears, and tied it in a knot.

“I am so grateful you are here,” Tarek said. He opened the car door for her. “You are good luck,” he said.

Adeline sat in the front seat of the car. She looked straight ahead, and said, "The sky is blood-orange today." Tarek did not notice. He was preoccupied with the state of traffic in the city.

He took her by the hands to the jewelry store and opened the velvet boxes for her appraisal. "She deserves the entire store. But we must select the best one," he said. Each box had a diamond necklace that was completely unlike the others, but to Adeline they all looked the same.

"I like this one," she said.

"So do I," he said. He looked around. "But she deserves more, more."

Two years later, Tarek remarried. Not to the woman who he broke his hands for. Instead, he married a woman he met in a Berlin swimming pool.

The canary yellow house did not know the sound of voices for several years. Abuela and Adeline lived there together in a tranquility that only broke when they played *cumbias* on the victrola. They danced together, and clanged pots and pans with wooden spoons. The ghosts joined them in the dance. Neighbors walked by the house and whispered of its peculiarities.

"*La guera loco*," they said.

"She is eternally young."

"She is demon-possessed."

"They should excise it from her."

"She's a prostitute."

"How do you know?"

"I saw her at the bus stop at night, taking men into the shadows."

"You should be in university," Adeline's father said.

Adeline went.

She tried to comprehend the stacks of scholarly articles and books and the important ideas of philosophers, physics, and social liberalism. But she was soon thrown out of the university for floating up to the ceiling and refusing to come back down again.

The professor of Bolshevik History walked into the classroom, and he looked up at her, stuck fast to the corner.

"Come down from there," he demanded.

"No," she said.

"You're sabotaging my lecture. The other

students will find this distracting."

"I don't want to," she said.

If he had asked her why she decided to float up there, she would have explained that she was tired of the men grabbing at her skirts.

"You look ridiculous," the professor said.

"You are ridiculous," Adeline said.

Office personnel arrived with ropes to pull Adeline down in front of the perplexed students. The university expelled her.

She returned to the canary yellow house. Her father poured her whiskey on ice.

"You need a husband," he said. "I will find a husband for you."

"I would rather not," Adeline said.

"Your life is down the drain," he said. "You don't work, you won't go to university, and you do not have a husband. I know someone who would be good for you. He works at my bank. He is dependable. I will bring him here next week, and you will marry him."

"Hello," the banker said.

"Hello," Adeline said.

"Do you take any interest in the stock market?"

"I don't know what that means," Adeline said. "I do read books by Dostoevsky, Ernesto Sabato, and Colette."

"Do you read *The Wall Street Journal*?"

"No."

"Do you like to golf?"

"I hate it."

"How about socializing. Do you like to go to parties, or social events?"

"I would rather die."

"What is it, exactly, that you do?"

"I think about things."

"You are odd."

"Thank you."

"Have you ever had a boyfriend?"

"Lots," she said. "I go to the bus stop at night, and lure men into the dark."

He looked over her as if she had not spoken.

"I would love a vodka," he said.

Abuela brought him vodka on ice.

"Will you marry me," he said to Adeline.

"We have a lot in common."

Her father nodded, and Abuela shook her head.

"I would like a long engagement," Adeline said.

Before the banker left, he leaned down and kissed Adeline.

"But *mija*, why did you agree to this," Abuela asked, once the front door had closed.

"The same reason why any of us do anything," Adeline said.

"I could tar and feather you. Get some common sense, girl."

Adeline floated up onto the ceiling and looked down at Abuela.

"Tarek has come to California, and we will go with him to dinner," Adeline's father said. "He says that he is having problems with his marriage."

"What does that have to do with me," Adeline said. "I don't want to see him."

"We have not seen him in seven years. He is our friend. How can you be so rude?"

Adeline went upstairs and dressed herself. She wore a cream-colored dress with a sweetheart neckline, and snakeskin heels. She put peach lipstick on and dusted blush across her nose and cheekbones. She examined herself in the mirror for nearly thirty minutes before walking downstairs to the car.

"No need to get so dressed up for an old friend," her father said.

Adeline did not speak. To her it was as though the driver's seat was occupied by air, and the wheel of the car was moved by the wind. The passengers in the cars on the side of the road seemed invisible. She could not stop her heart from beating through the sides of her ribcage.

They arrived at the restaurant, and she did not notice the sign, the hostess, or the tables full of clamor.

Adeline crossed through an empty room and went to Tarek. He was there with a beautiful woman in blue satin. He had a lined face. He stood.

"*Habibi*," he said. "Meet my friend..."

Adeline fainted on the floor.

She woke up hours later in the living room next to a clay pot of liquid the color of blood.

"Drink," Abuela said. "It will rid you of this affliction."

"I'm not sick," she said.

"Lovesickness is worse than typhus," Abuela said.

“What is typhus?”

“Drink, before I pin your ears to the wall.”

Adelina waited till Abuela was gone, and poured the fluid out in the ferns in the yard.

She drifted out in the humid air, and then grounded her feet to the earth. Sometimes, Adelina worried that she might float up far above the city and not be able to come back down again. Smoke curled around her wrists.

Tarek stood there. He held a cigarette.

“My God,” Adelina said. “Why are you out here, alone? You scare me.”

“I took you home,” he said.

“My father doesn’t live here anymore. He lives with his wife in Ensenada. He visits sometimes, to take me on drives. But then you knew that.”

“Yes,” he said. “Yes, it is you I waited here to see.”

“I don’t drive, you know. They tried to get me my license, but I crashed into three cars in the parking lot. I am talking a lot. Will you come in and have a cognac? Do you like that? Or we have tequila. Or rum. Or wine. You can have tea.”

“What’s that you poured into the grass? The fragrance is strange.”

“This is something to rid a person of love,” she said.

“Are you in love,” he asked.

She looked at him.

“Who gave you this drink,” he asked.

“Abuela. She told me it would take away the lovesickness.”

“Why did you pour it out into the grass?”

“Because I want to be lovesick.”

She waited.

“If things were different,” he said. “But I am married. I have two children. I cannot be with you. Even if I divorce, I will have been divorced twice. You are my best friend’s daughter. The next morning, you would laugh. But I would cry. And you deserve better. Someone who can take you into the open, to give you marriage. You are Adelina Castelan.”

He stopped.

“Come here,” he said.

She stood in front of him, and touched his face.

“Should I stop,” she said.

“You should never stop.”

Adelina woke in the dark sheets of Tarek’s apartment. He examined her body from the shoulders to the toes.

“You were not a virgin,” he said.

“Of course not,” Adelina said. “Virginity does not exist.”

“Virginity does not exist,” he laughed.

“Men invented the idea.”

“How many have you had,” Tarek asked.

“Hundreds, I think.”

“I thought you did not notice men.”

“I only notice them in the dark.”

He looked away.

“How many women have you had,” she asked.

“Since I have been married, I’ve loved thirty-three women. And it’s not even because I want to prove that I am good at sex. No, it is the companionship that I love. If anyone knew about this, they would stone us to death in the streets.”

“Let them.”

“It’s painful.”

He got up.

He made coffee and returned to her.

“Your eyes,” he said, taking her face in his hands. “They’re so old.”

“We have met before,” she said.

Neither of them spoke.

They were in a city ravaged by war. Mortar explosions blew dust and rubble over their heads. They reached for each other in the dark and held one another until the last crescendo of sound made their ears ring.

“Yes,” he said. “I looked for you.”

“But we were lost.”

“Your brothers and sisters,” he said.

“Lost.”

“Your mother.”

“Lost.”

Tarek began to cry.

“What is it,” Adelina said.

“I do not like to remember those times.”

In a moment they forgot what they had been discussing.

“I love how you love women,” Adelina said.

“I am to take your father flying today,” he said. “I will tell him everything.”

“What will we do?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “We will love and hate each other.”

That day, Tarek and Adelina’s father went up into the sky. The plane crashed into the canyon, and both men were killed.

Adelina opened her eyes on the table and looked up at Abuela and Tarek.

“Why are you covering me in ice,” she said.

Abuela said, “Thank Jesus.”

“You collapsed when I got out of the car,” Tarek said.

“You died three years ago. I cannot see you.”

“You can see me. Everyone can. But I am on borrowed time.”

“I mean that I will not see you, because I have a wedding to go to,” Adelina said.

“Whose wedding,” Tarek said.

“My own.”

“Who will you marry?”

“The banker.”

“You cannot marry him.”

“You are dead.”

“Certainly, but not as dead as the banker.”

“A ghost cannot have a child with a living woman,” Adelina said. “And I do not do housework.”

“I will only be corporeal for a short while,” Tarek said. “Unless you tell me you will marry me, I will need to return to the land of the dead.”

“Where will we go?”

“We will move away to the coast of the Arabian Sea. There, I will take you to a house with translucent curtains. We will eat cakes made from dates. You will wear white linens, and I will fill the house with wildflowers.”

“I will go with you,” Adelina said.

“I would rather you go to the devil,” Abuela said.

“We will move there in a week, Abuela.”

“Your father would draw and quarter this man, and run him out of town on a rail.”

Adelina floated up to the ceiling.

She stayed there until twilight. By that time, Abuela and Tarek sat by the hearth, and spoke as old friends. They communed with her father’s ghost. Soon her mother appeared, dressed in a gown made of tiger lilies. The vaquero, the schoolteacher, Ernesto and Yvelia Castelan, and all of their children gathered round the fire.

They smoked, drank chocolate, and talked about far-off places. When dusk fell, they played music and danced.

The parrots on the telephone wires sang after the victrola, “*Canta y no llores.*” □

Horsamorphosis

Anahita Ayasoufi



Illustration: Digital Dreams by Yvonne Stock

Mr. Philip Conrad parked the Chevy Malibu on the shoulder, even though the shoulder was not quite distinguishable from the dirt road--they were both mud beds, the only difference being that the shoulder had more grass mixed with the mud. He opened the Chevy's door but hesitated.

He checked the address the navigator had brought him to, and it was correct. A wooden sign reading 'Creativity Castle' hung loosely from a tilting pole that squeaked back and forth in the wind. But the place was no castle and for the life of him, he could not see a connection with

creativity. It was a stable, a barn, crimson red with white lining on the roof. Horses neighed and groaned, and the air smelled of wet hay and fresh manure.

It was three o'clock in the afternoon and he had driven two and a half hours to get here. He had to make something out of it before driving back, even if that something was to simply see the barn's owner and make sure there were no creativity classes being held in the stables. This was obviously a prank by his colleagues. Financiers' way of telling him that his squareness had no cure.

'You're too sober, too square, too much inside the box,' they had told him. And then

left this address on his desk for him to get creativity lessons, supposedly. How gullible of him to fall for it.

He stepped out of the Chevy. His leather shoes sank in the mud and his slacks began to soak in the brownish goo. The pants would have to go to the dry cleaners; the shoes were perhaps ruined for good. He gritted his teeth and entered the barn.

"Hello?" Mr. Conrad bellowed.

All that happened was that a horse headbutted his arm. It tickled and he shook it. He tried to keep his arms close to his body not to rub more animals.

"Hello?" he repeated.

"Get that bucket for me, would you?" a voice said from the far end of the barn.

Mr. Conrad looked around. "Bucket? What bucket? Look, I am here for the lessons." He felt stupid saying it.

"It's on the floor, by the third stall on your left." The voice sounded annoyed.

Mr. Conrad found the stall, but as soon as his hand touched the handle of the bucket, a horse neighed, and he jumped.

The man in the far end bellowed, "What kind of a ranch hand are you?"

"I'm not a ranch hand. I am a broker. I told you I am here for the lessons. Obviously, this is no creativity school. I will see myself out."

He began to walk back. He would go to his car and drive straight home, change, warm up his dinner, and same old, same old.

He stopped and stood still. He had come here with so much hope for a change. He had thought there really was a school that could teach him to become a more colorful person, to savor life more.

The horse that had headbutted him nuzzled his arm. He turned, locked eyes with the horse, and his voice caught in his throat. There was something in the curve of the

Unseen Wounds

Lillian Heimisdottir

animal's eyes, kindness and understanding so deep he had never seen it in humans that surrounded him. He leaned closer. The horse leaned toward him too. The beauty in the eyes was overwhelming.

"Let him smell your hand," the barn keeper said from the back.

He raised his hand gingerly, but already his heartbeat was slowing to an unfamiliar rate.

"Are the lessons somewhere near here?" he asked, as the horse sniffed at his palm. The sensation was strangely calming.

The horse lowered his head, and he caressed its forehead. The act came to him naturally. The chestnut hair was fine, soft, and much smoother than he had imagined.

"Are you getting that bucket or not?" The barn keeper said from the shadows.

This all seemed surreal. The oddest thing was that he wanted to roll with it. No, not roll with it, but roll in it, in hay, and in mud. A liberating neigh wanted to escape his throat. What exuberance! He let it out. He neighed but softly, not to startle the animals. Then he tried it a little louder, then with a guttural voice, then in a higher pitch.

"Quit the horseplay and get that bucket, will you?" The barn keeper hollered.

He reached for the bucket, but saw something else, a brown rag lying on the floor. The rag was dirty as hell, but he did not care. He grabbed it and held it to his nose. Then he shook his head from side to side making the rag fly in the air.

"I have a trunk! I am an elephant!" He laughed and began skipping toward the back of the barn, as if he were a horse.

"I'm a horsephant! No, I'm an elehorse!"

He stopped when he reached the barn keeper who was calmly brushing another horse—a snow-white beauty with defined muscles and a golden mane. The barn keeper had cowboy boots on and pale blue jeans, his face lit in stripes of light shafts that came in from the back windows and made the dust in the air dance. The barn keeper was not smiling. In fact, he looked quite stern.

"I see it now. These are the lessons, aren't they? I am being creative, aren't I?" Mr. Conrad said.

The barn keeper stopped brushing and looked at him coolly. Then he rubbed his palms on the sides of his jeans and began to limp his way toward the bucket. □



Illustration: Pawel Zmich / Adobe Stock

"See what happened to me yesterday," she says the minute I walk in the door. No *Hello*, no *How are you*, no nothing.

"Look." She shows me her arm that is full of bruises and scratches.

"What happened?"

"I was carrying some boxes down into the basement, when I slipped and almost fell."

"Into the basement?" I ask.

"Yes, I dropped the boxes and hit my arm against the railing and the wall." She shows me her arm again.

"You've got to be careful."

"Well, at first I didn't feel anything, but when I woke up this morning it looked like this." She waits for me to say something, and when I don't reply she points at her arm again. "Do you think it's broken?"

"I don't know, but you should probably have it checked. Does it hurt a lot?"

"No, not really. It looks bad, but it doesn't really hurt."

"So maybe we'll wait a few hours and if you start to feel pain, we'll go to the clinic and have a doctor look at it," I suggest and she nods in agreement. I really don't want to take her to the clinic unless it's absolutely necessary. I hate the waiting rooms where you have to sit for what seems like hours, crammed up with people with all kinds of problems that you don't want to know about.

"I going to check those boxes in the basement," I say and get up.

The door to the basement is locked, and I get the key that is hidden under a floorboard. When I open the door I see no boxes on the stairs. And it's apparent by the cobwebs and the dust that nobody has been here for months.

I close the door and go back into the kitchen, where she sits peacefully. When she looks up at me, she greets me as if she hasn't seen me for a long time, and I know now that I will have to take her to the doctor today. □

In the Grips of Fashion

A Day in the Life of a Trend-Weary Soul

Erik N. Patel

Illustration: Fantastic / Adobe Stock



Each morning, as the first rays of sunlight timidly peek through my blinds, I am jolted awake not by the chirping of birds, nor the familiar buzz of an alarm clock, but by the shrill chime of my Trend Alert app. This app, a veritable digital tyrant in the realm of fashion, ruthlessly dictates the ebb and flow of style trends with the cold precision of a dictator. As I fumble sleepily with my phone, today’s edict flashes across the screen in bold, unapologetic letters: “Florals are out; monochrome is in!” My heart sinks. There goes my prized collection of floral prints, relegated overnight from the pinnacle of chic to the depths of the fashionably forbidden.

I lay there for a moment, staring at the ceiling, pondering the fickle nature of fashion. Just yesterday, my closet was a treasure trove of vibrant patterns and lively blooms, each piece a testament to my once-impeccable fashion sense. Now,

it feels more like a museum of archaic relics, a testament to the relentless, unyielding march of trendsetting whims. With a heavy heart, I rise and approach my wardrobe. My fingers linger on the soft fabric of a particularly beloved floral shirt, its bright colors and bold patterns now a glaring symbol of style insubordination. I can almost hear the silent judgment of the Fashion Police, their imaginary tsk-tsks echoing in my mind as I reluctantly push the shirt to the back of the closet.

The rest of my wardrobe undergoes a similar scrutiny. Each garment is evaluated not for its comfort, its fit, or the memories it holds, but for its adherence to the latest dictate of the fashion overlords. The vibrant yellows, the playful pinks, the daring reds – all find themselves exiled to the nether regions of my closet. In their place, the monochrome army ascends – blacks, whites, greys – a monotonous

parade of singular color schemes, each item blending into the next in a dull, unending spectrum of conformity.

As I dress in the approved attire, a feeling of sartorial imprisonment washes over me. Gone is the joy of mixing and matching, of expressing my mood and personality through the language of clothes. In its place is a mechanical compliance, a resignation to the whims of an unseen fashion tribunal that governs my wardrobe choices with an iron fist. Each day, I wonder: What will they decree next? Which cherished piece will be next to fall from grace?

And so begins another day under the watchful eye of the Trend Alert app, a relentless cycle of adaptation and obedience in the ever-shifting landscape of fashion. With each notification, a piece of my fashion identity is chipped away, replaced by a hollow conformity to the latest trend – a never-ending game of style roulette where the stakes are my individuality, and the house always wins.

As I step out, the streets feel like runways where the Fashion Police patrol, equipped with style scanners and judgmental glares. Their presence is a constant reminder that in this city, a fashion faux pas is more than a mistake – it’s a social crime.

On my way to work, I witness a fashion detainment – a poor soul dared to wear cargo shorts, a cardinal sin in this season of slim-fit trousers. I quickly glance down at my own pants, ensuring they adhere to the prescribed silhouette.

At work, the water cooler talk is a minefield. Colleagues dissect last night’s celebrity fashion choices with the precision

of surgeons. "Did you see that tie? Two inches too wide!" they scoff. I nod in agreement, masking my ignorance of this week's tie-width regulations.

Lunch is no different. The café is a hotspot for undercover fashion agents, disguised as baristas and waiters, ever-ready to report a style misdemeanor. I carefully choose a seat, ensuring my back is to most patrons - fewer eyes to scrutinize my ensemble.

The day's most nerve-wracking moment comes with the Afternoon Apparel Audit. Our office fashionista, doubling as the unofficial style sheriff, makes her rounds. She pauses at my desk, eyes narrowing at my shirt's buttons. "Acceptable," she finally declares. I exhale a sigh of relief. Today, I'm safe.

Happy Hour after work is an extravagant affair, where the style stakes are even higher. I stick to safe topics, like the resurgence of minimalist watches, while secretly mourning the loss of my vibrant, personality-filled wristwear, now deemed passé.

Returning home, I finally peel off my armor of trendy garments. In the solitude of my room, I reach for an ancient, comfy tee - a relic from a time when clothes were about comfort, not compliance. A sudden knock at the door sends me into a panic. Hastily, I stash the tee. It's just my neighbor, but the fear of being caught in a fashion felony lingers.

In this city, the Fashion Police are more than a metaphor; they are the gatekeepers of social acceptance. We dress not for comfort or expression, but for conformity. Every day is a battle to stay afloat in the ever-changing sea of fashion dos and don'ts.

As I lay in bed, I wonder what tomorrow's Trend Alert will bring. A new color to embrace? A style to shun? In this world, where the Fashion Police reign supreme, one thing is certain: to be fashionable is to be in a constant state of alert, always ready to adapt, always fearing the unforgiving eye of the style sentinel. Welcome to the life of a trend-slave, where every outfit is a statement, and every statement is a risk. □

Drug Paraphernalia

Virginia Watts

Winter of '74 Dad bought a wood stove
drove all the way to Vermont
for an oiled, cast iron heater
to outsmart the energy crisis

My brothers and I gathered round
as he set flame inside the smug, squat belly
When the stove's door shut with a braggy *bang*
I knew the contraption was a bad idea

I mourned for our open fireplace hearth
where this dark stranger now loomed
No more kind-hearted, crackling, dancing blazes
No more sparks popping wonder onto woven rug

Now we'll be nice and cozy! He cooed
but the stove did us dirty, sucked all the heat
from our bedrooms, froze us under our covers,
the only warm place was where it stood

*Take it out, I begged. Put it to the curb
like you did our old toilet.* Resolute,
Dad refused to give up on the idea of a miracle,
tried different types of wood and fans in vain

He was like that, a champion of denial,
like at 80 when he bought himself a trumpet,
a bike for my mother to play and ride too late in life
Still, he wheeled out the bike, admired its crimson paint

Remember, though, people are never one note
strummed from a window's gold glow into night
On the morning he left that house forever
bound for an assisted living he asked a favor

*Check above the drop ceiling
in your brother's old basement room.
Gather everything you can.
When your mother is in the car, show me.*

Postal Culture Shock

Melinda Brasher



Photo: Asvolias / Adobe Stock

When I first started travelling, I went knowing that things would be different. The people would speak different languages and eat different foods. Governments and fashions and currencies would vary. I had some vague notion that people would have different ideas about things—a different world view, I suppose. But I didn't think much about the little day-to-day differences.

And then I tried to mail something.

I lived for a semester in Mexico during the pre-smart-phone era, when you couldn't simply summon your loved ones' talking faces onto the device in your hand. Internet cafés were still a thing back then—and don't get me wrong, the internet was killing letter writing everywhere, but in the US, people were still sending greeting cards and postcards. Friendly letters were uncommon but not yet rare.

Apparently, this was not true in Mexico. I lived in a town of around 200,000. There was one post office, and nobody seemed to know where it was. Once I finally tracked it down, I went several times. It was never busy. My footsteps echoed in the emptiness of the dim, high-ceilinged room, and the clerk always looked surprised to see me. I don't remember seeing a single mailbox on the street, and no one at the souvenir stands ever offered to sell me stamps with my postcards, like they did in Europe. I got the impression that people would travel for hours to the next state to celebrate in person before they'd even think about sending a birthday card.

As for packages, they'd devised a mysterious method of delivering them through the bus lines. As a foreigner looking on, this always struck me as vaguely James Bond: putting your packages on the bus, then walking casually away, while someone

in sunglasses sits at the station in another town, trying to blend in with the innocent passengers, monitoring the platform for the 5:28 bus, which is probably late, waiting for the secret package. Bond-like or not, the system apparently worked, so what use was there for a post office?

The main post office in Madrid, Spain, was then called *el Palacio de Comunicaciones*: The Palace of Communication. The building was grander than any I'd seen in the States, an intricate white castle-like wonder none of my friends back home would believe was a post office, no matter how many times I swore on my honor. The glories of stately historic Madrid surrounded it: mythological statues, arching monuments, world-famous art museums. The wide and shady *Paseo del Prado* led away from it, a tree-lined, café-dotted pedestrian path between two lanes of traffic. I'd never seen such a thing, never lived in such a place, and I fell in love with the whole scene, with a country that could make such a national treasure out of a post office.

In the western United States, most post offices are newish and blocky on the outside, functional and impersonal on the inside, and always sporting a flag. I remember a European post office—maybe in France or Germany—where the marble floors were colored by the stained-glass vault stretching above us the whole length of the hall, and all the metal was polished brass. It's hard not to draw comparisons.

I grew up in a small town in Arizona, where the post office is a big red brick building—one of the biggest structures in town. It's a good building to give directions by in a town where no one knows street names, only landmarks. "Turn left at Palace Pharmacy." "It's on the street just up from

the post office.” When we went to the post office, Mr. Moya was always working, and he knew our names. Once, my brother procrastinated filling out a scholarship application until the day it had to be postmarked, and he ended up knocking on the back door just after closing time. They took the application without complaint and mailed it. He got the scholarship. That big red brick building is still the post office, as far as I know, though the Palace of Communication in Madrid has now been taken over by government offices and renamed the Palace of Cibeles.

In Poland I had to pay my phone bill at the post office, and from the long lines and mystifyingly long and grim conversations, it appeared that you could do many other things too, like maybe mortgage your house or file for divorce. You could also buy snacks at some. Maybe they’d had too many people starve while in line. The lines were for specific purposes, clearly written on the booth in long lists of indecipherable Polish words. If you happened not to understand much Polish, you’d just wait in line with crossed fingers until it was your turn, and if they glared at you or yelled at you or both, you’d just gamble on another line.

In the Czech Republic you could also pay bills and buy lottery tickets and postcards and cash checks at the post office, and when you got in the wrong line, they usually only sighed with a “dumb American” sigh and pointed out the correct window. Whenever I received a package, they delivered a slip to the box at my apartment building, and I’d have to go down to the post office with my passport in hand to pick up the package. They would put it in their side of a thickly glassed-in lazy susan, like they have at embassies for security. They would then study my passport suspiciously. Finally they’d turn the lazy susan around so I could get the package out on my end, as if it were a bomb.

To send a package from there or anywhere in Europe, you have to fill out several forms, including the customs slip, detailing everything inside, the value, the purpose, your life story, and your political party, or so it seems, before they accept

it. If you don’t understand the forms, you just have to stand there, looking lost, until a stranger takes pity on you and explains in English. Then you pay a lot of money, wait six weeks, and hope the other party receives it in one piece.

In Riga, Latvia, I stayed in a youth hostel right across the street from what was probably the main post office in the country, a fact that sounds slightly less impressive when you remember that Latvia is the size of West Virginia. The post office was open until 8:00 p.m. or later. I can’t remember exactly. At 9:00 or 10:00 I would watch a poor woman working hard into the night in an upstairs office to get that mail delivered. Trucks came and went at all hours, let in by heavily armed guards, and lights burned late, like the headquarters of some government in the middle of a crisis.

One of the main, enduring crises of the French seems to be preserving their language, and in some small way the postal system may help. French used to be

the lingua franca of the western world, but now, quite indisputably, that honor is held by English. The rest of the world doesn’t conduct all its business and diplomacy in French anymore. Not all educated people learn it. It’s no longer okay to throw random French phrases into your novels, trusting that anyone literate will understand. But in Europe, in many countries that are *not* French-speaking, they have little blue stickers they put on their letters, stickers that say in bold white letters *Par Avion*. Everyone understands this means airmail. In the Czech Republic, all the post office forms come written first in French, then in Czech, without a single word of English.

Poste Restante is a handy term I learned from my guidebooks. If you’re traveling in Europe, a friend can send a letter or package to you *Poste Restante* in a city you’ll be passing through, and the post office will hold it until you swing by to pick it up. This is uncommon enough in the States nowadays that I used the



El Palacio de Cibeles, formerly the Palace of Communication. The monumental building that has been the seat of Madrid City Council since 2007. Opened in 1909, it was designed and built as the headquarters for the Spanish Post Office.



Mule train at the bottom of the Grand Canyon, possibly carrying hikers' postcards. The photo was taken by the author on her journey.

French phrase for years without knowing there was an English equivalent: General Delivery. Because whether you are in Estonia or Ireland, *Poste Restante* will get the job done.

At the graduate school in Arizona where I worked, I manned the little post office sometimes when the normal staff was gone. I sat in the back and listened to the snippets of conversation students trailed behind them as they checked their boxes—dull arrangements of when to meet for dinner and juicy bits of gossip that harked back to the old days of the post office serving as the main center of information exchange. I sat and listened and idly read the list of French mail terms and their translations, in case packages or letters came back from parts of the world that still use French on their mail: *adresse insuffisante, en sus de la norme, inconnu, retour*. On and on went the list, displayed prominently in a post office halfway across the world from France. I hope the French can take comfort in this holdout of French as the international language.

European mailboxes come in all sizes and shapes. Some are bright red attention-getters, standing free on the sidewalk, like

the offspring of a bloated fire hydrant and a happy garbage can. Some are not much bigger than Kleenex boxes, mounted unobtrusively on building walls. Many of these mailboxes display the country's postal emblem, just as the squarish blue boxes in the US show a sleek, stylized eagle. Our postal eagle symbolizes, I suppose, how fast the service is and perhaps how commanding, how predatory. Half the countries in Europe have as their emblem some sort of yellow horn, like a French horn or a truncated trumpet. It often looks more like Aladdin's lamp than anything, and for a long time, that's what I thought it was. I wondered why so many of the emblems were so strangely similar, until it finally dawned on me: it's a horn, like a medieval messenger would carry.

That's what I love about Europe and so many other countries. Sure, they like to be fast and intimidating, like the American eagle, but what's equally important is their link with a romantic past that communicated by rolled parchment, wax seals, and royal heralds.

As our society moves further and further away from physical mail and the need for

post offices, I can't help but think we're losing something wonderful. Something that once required horses and dogsleds and mail carriers who trudged around letting neither snow nor rain nor heat nor gloom of night stop them.

But let's not mourn the postal service quite yet. After all, people have been speaking doom about libraries for years and years, but they're still going strong. Even if we're using phones and computers to do many of the things we used to do with paper and envelopes, people are shopping by mail more than ever. And just this year, at the bottom of the Grand Canyon, I went to the Phantom Ranch canteen and bought a stamp and a postcard. I sat in the shade, resting my feet, drinking my lemonade, and writing a message to my family. Then I dropped it in the box so they could deliver it... by mule... almost five thousand feet up the dusty trails to where civilization began again and the postal service could take all our postcards the rest of the way to friends and family, a sort of everyday miracle of persistence and connection that I hope will never totally fade away. □

Flag-Draped Coffins

Charles Robertson Jr.



Jenny found it impossible to hold back her tears as the Marine presented the flag to Ariel. He raised his white-gloved hand to his brow and lowered it with mechanical precision. The casket bearers marched away.

Even the sky wept for Ariel's husband as a cold drizzle fell. The Marines in their sharp uniforms and their spouses in coal-black dresses ignored the chilled mist and approached Ariel one by one.

"I'm sorry for your loss."

"If there's anything I can do."

Jenny squeezed her husband's hand while they made their way through the crowd. When their husbands were deployed, she would get together with Ariel and talk all night. Now, Jenny couldn't think of anything to say that would ease her friend's pain, so she repeated, "If there's anything I can do." Such an empty phrase.

Jenny looked upward, thanking God it wasn't her husband in the coffin. Then she

stared into Ariel's wet eyes and shivered. Was it wrong to think that?

Jenny crawled into bed and laid her head on her husband's chest. For the first time in seven months, he was home and the warmth of his presence ran through her. Her thoughts wandered down the dark street. Three doors away, Ariel lay in a cold, empty bed. Guilt drove that warmth away.

He stared at the ceiling. "Why is Ariel's husband dead and I'm still here?"

Jenny couldn't think of a response. She didn't know the answer herself.

He rolled toward her. "It could just as easily have been me. Hell, it should have been me."

She put her arm across him. "Don't say that."

He lay stiff, staring blankly at the ceiling, not the always-smiling man she had known before his deployment.

She turned toward him. "Honey, please, let me help you."

"There's no way you can help me."

"I want to understand."

"You can't. You weren't there."

She stroked her husband's cheek. "Please promise me you'll see someone about it tomorrow."

He faced the other direction. The room became as quiet as the days he had been away.

The Marine handed Jenny the flag from her husband's coffin. The mourners uttered their well-intentioned but meaningless words. Ariel hugged her, each woman knowing exactly how the other felt. Jenny had prepared herself for the possibility of her husband's death on some foreign battlefield. That was the lot of the Marine spouse. But she never imagined the bullet that finally killed her husband would be fired by his own hand. □

Rán Versus the Volcano

An Artist's Encounter with Nature

Lillian Heimisdottir



Iceland, a mystical realm where ancient sagas dance with the raw forces of nature, has once again bestowed upon the world a gem of artistic brilliance with Rán Flygenring's *Volcano*. This entrancing picture book, recently honored with the prestigious 2023 Nordic Council Children and Young People's Literature Prize, has made a eruptive impact on the literary landscape, captivating audiences not merely with its

visually stunning portrayal but also with the depth and intricacy of its storytelling.

In *Volcano*, Flygenring masterfully marries the enchanting allure of Icelandic folklore with the unyielding, awe-inspiring power of its natural environment. The narrative, set against the backdrop of Iceland's dramatic volcanic terrain, is a testimony to the island's unique ability to inspire tales that are as fiercely beautiful as they are

poignant. The book's ascent to literary prominence is marked by its dynamic illustrations that echo the vibrancy and unpredictability of an actual volcanic eruption.

However, the true essence of Flygenring's work lies in its ability to weave a narrative that transcends the boundaries of a traditional children's book. Through *Volcano*, she navigates the complex interplay of human emotions and the sublime forces

of nature, crafting a story that resonates with a wide spectrum of readers. This book is not just a visual feast; it is a journey through a landscape where folklore and reality converge, creating a narrative tapestry that is rich in symbolism and meaning.

The accolade of the Nordic Council Children and Young People's Literature Prize is a testament to the book's profound impact and its contribution to the canon of children's literature. It acknowledges not just the aesthetic beauty of Flygenring's illustrations but also the depth of her narrative—a narrative that is deeply rooted in the cultural and natural heritage of Iceland, making *Volcano* a remarkable addition to both Icelandic and global children's literature.

The Birth of a Volcanic Tale

Rán Flygenring, an artist already decorated with numerous accolades, ventures into new creative territories with her award winning masterpiece. This work mirrors the enigmatic and breathtaking nature of Iceland's own landscape, renowned for its raw beauty and untamed forces, echoing the unpredictability of the very land that inspired it. The story centers around Kaktus, a young, inquisitive boy whose routine life is transformed into an extraordinary adventure. Accompanied by his mother, Brá, a seasoned tour guide, their journey begins as a typical tourist excursion, showcasing Iceland's picturesque landscapes and quaint attractions. However, this seemingly ordinary trip soon escalates into a profound experience as they

encounter the primal forces of a volcanic eruption.

This pivotal moment marks a dramatic shift in the narrative, as Kaktus and Brá find themselves in the midst of one of nature's most formidable spectacles. Flygenring's storytelling prowess shines as she intricately details their emotional and physical journey through this unexpected event. The volcanic eruption, a central character in its own right, serves as a catalyst for a deeper exploration of the human-nature relationship. It's a journey that challenges Kaktus and his mother, pushing them to the limits of their understanding and forcing them to confront the overwhelming power of the natural world.



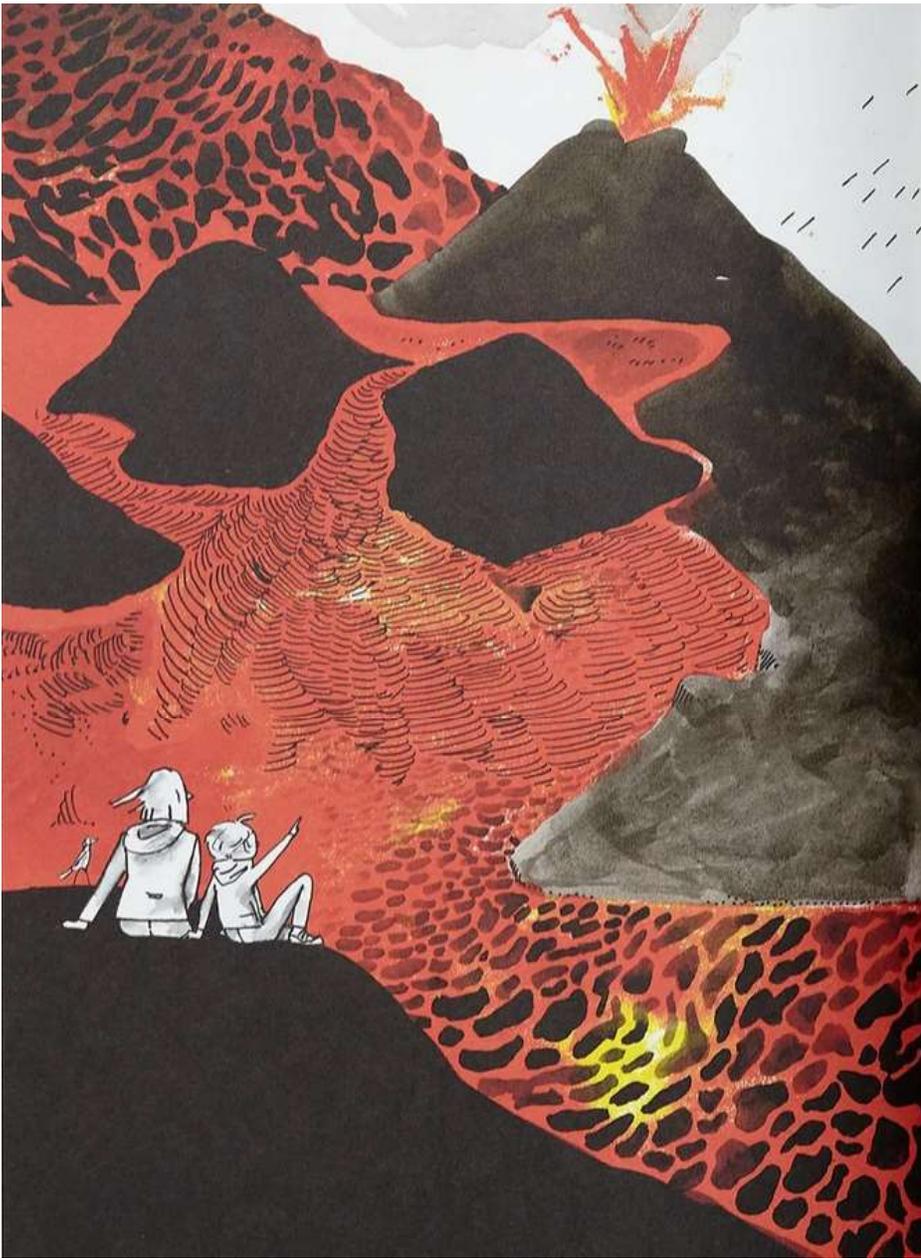
Throughout *Volcano*, Flygenring skillfully balances the elements of a gripping adventure with poignant moments of introspection and discovery. The narrative is imbued with a sense of wonder and respect for the natural world, traits deeply ingrained in Icelandic culture. As Kaktus and Brá navigate through the transformative landscape, shaped by the erupting volcano, they, and in turn the readers, are invited to reflect on the majesty and unpredictability of nature. This journey, from the mundane to the magnificent, is not just a physical one but also an emotional and spiritual odyssey that delves into the heart of what it means to be in awe of nature's grandeur.

In the book, Flygenring transcends the typical boundaries of children's literature, offering a story that is rich in imagery, emotion, and depth. This narrative is a testament to her ability to capture the essence of her Icelandic heritage while also presenting a universally relatable tale of adventure, resilience, and the awe-inspiring power of nature.

A Symphony of Color and Emotion

Volcano distinguishes itself in the realm of children's literature through its visually striking narrative, a hallmark of Rán Flygenring's distinctive artistic style. In this enchanting picture book, Flygenring employs a rich and vibrant palette to depict





the wild, untamed majesty of nature, creating a vivid contrast against the monochromatic human figures. This deliberate artistic choice goes beyond mere aesthetics; it's a profound symbolic expression that underscores the fleeting nature of human existence juxtaposed with the eternal and overwhelming forces of the Earth.

Flygenring's illustrations are not just visually arresting but are imbued with layers of meaning and symbolism. The use of color is particularly noteworthy – the fiery reds and deep oranges of the volcanic lava stand in stark contrast to the subdued tones used for the human characters. This contrast is a visual metaphor for the dominance and permanence of nature in contrast to the ephemeral and often insignificant scale of

human life. The lush, vivid depiction of the natural landscape in *Volcano* captures the raw beauty and power of the Earth, evoking a sense of awe and respect for the natural world.

The attention to detail in the illustrations is remarkable, with each page teeming with intricate elements that draw readers into the story. Young readers are not just passive observers but are invited to engage with the narrative actively, exploring the rich tapestry of images that Flygenring has woven. This engagement is not just visual but intellectual and emotional, as the detailed illustrations serve as a gateway to exploring deeper themes such as the relationship between humans and nature, the impact of natural phenomena

on our lives, and the broader ecological messages implicit in the story.

Moreover, the book's visual narrative encourages a dialogue between the young reader and the world around them. Through *Volcano*, Flygenring not only entertains but educates, using her art to spark curiosity about the natural world and our place within it. The book becomes a tool for understanding and appreciating the complex interplay between humanity and nature, providing a platform for discussions about environmental stewardship and our responsibility towards the Earth.

In essence, *Volcano* stands out as a masterpiece of children's literature, one that marries exceptional artistic talent with a profound narrative. Flygenring's use of color, contrast, and detail makes the book a visual feast, one that invites readers of all ages to delve into a world where the beauty of nature is both celebrated and revered. This book is not just a story; it's an experience, one that leaves a lasting impression on its audience.

More Than Just a Children's Book

At the core of *Volcano*, Rán Flygenring has woven an intricate tapestry rich in emotion and introspective depth. The narrative artfully balances the awe-inspiring spectacle of a volcanic eruption with the seemingly mundane aspects of daily life, such as a lice epidemic. This striking juxtaposition extends beyond mere dramatic contrast; it acts as a powerful metaphor, challenging our often narrow perspective of the natural world and questioning our role within its vast and intricate tapestry.

Flygenring's story delves into the complex relationship humans have with nature. By placing the grandeur of a volcanic eruption side by side with trivial human concerns, she compels readers to reassess their understanding of what is truly significant. This narrative choice is a deliberate and thought-provoking move, designed to stir reflection on how we often overlook the monumental forces of nature amidst our daily preoccupations. It's a reminder of how our lives are intricately connected to and influenced by the natural world, yet we often fail to acknowledge its omnipresence and power.

Moreover, *Volcano* encourages a broader contemplation of humanity's place in the natural order. Are we merely passive observers, transient visitors in a world that predates and will outlast us? Or do we, as part of this natural system, hold a deeper responsibility towards the preservation and respect of our planet? Flygenring's narrative invites readers of all ages to ponder these questions, fostering a sense of responsibility and a deeper understanding of our interdependence with nature.

The book also acts as a subtle critique of our often superficial engagement with the environment. By contrasting the eruption's majesty with something as trivial as a lice outbreak, Flygenring underlines how our preoccupations with minor inconveniences can blind us to the beauty and fragility of the world around us. It's a call to shift our focus, to widen our lens, and to appreciate the natural wonders that surround us.

In essence, *Volcano* is more than a children's book; it is a profound exploration of humanity's place in the natural world. It invites readers to reflect on how we perceive and interact with the environment, urging

a deeper appreciation and respect for the forces that shape our planet. Through this narrative, Flygenring not only tells a captivating story but also ignites a crucial dialogue about our collective responsibility towards the Earth, our shared home.

A Message of Coexistence

One of the most profound elements of Rán Flygenring's *Volcano* is the subtle yet powerful message of harmony that resonates throughout its narrative. The book culminates in a remarkably symbolic conclusion, where the lice, initially seen as pests, find a new, harmonious existence with their host. This ending is not just a creative twist in the tale but serves as a poignant allegory for the potential symbiosis between humanity and the natural world. Flygenring's storytelling is nuanced and gentle; she does not resort to preaching. Instead, she guides the reader towards a vision filled with hope, illustrating that a peaceful and mutually beneficial coexistence with nature is not only possible but essential.

This message of harmony is particularly relevant in today's world, where the relationship between humans and the environment is often marked by conflict and exploitation. In her story the author challenges this narrative, suggesting that humans can, and should, find ways to live in balance with nature rather than dominating it. The lice, often seen as a nuisance in the human world, find a new role in the ecosystem within the book. This shift in perspective encourages readers to reconsider their views on other aspects of the natural world, recognizing the value and role of even the smallest creatures in the ecological balance.

Moreover, Flygenring's choice to end *Volcano* on a note of harmony acts as a metaphor for broader environmental issues. It subtly highlights the importance of understanding and respecting the interconnectedness of all life forms. The book advocates for a paradigm shift in how we view our relationship with nature—from one of control and subjugation to one of respect and partnership. It's a call for a deeper awareness of our environmental impact





Author and illustrator Rán Flygenring accepting the 2023 Nordic Council Children and Young People's Literature Prize for her picture book *Volcano* in Oslo last November.

and a reminder of our responsibility to nurture and protect the natural world.

Additionally, this theme of harmony extends beyond environmental concerns, touching on broader themes of empathy, understanding, and acceptance. By illustrating how two seemingly disparate entities like lice and their host can find a harmonious balance, Flygenring opens up a dialogue about tolerance and coexistence in a wider context. It's a lesson in seeing the world from different perspectives and finding beauty and balance in unlikely places.

In essence, *Volcano* is a testament to the idea that harmony with nature is not just a lofty ideal but a practical and necessary goal. The book's conclusion is a powerful reminder that even in our smallest actions and interactions, there lies the potential for creating a more balanced and sustainable relationship with the world around us. Flygenring's narrative is a beacon of hope, gently guiding readers towards a future where humans and nature thrive together in a respectful and harmonious coexistence.

An Illustrator with a Cause

Rán Flygenring's journey in the literary and artistic world is characterized by a unique style that infuses each page of her work with vitality and charm. Her distinctive approach to storytelling and illustration sets her apart in the realm of children's literature. However, the appeal of her work

extends far beyond the boundaries of age, resonating with a diverse audience who appreciates the art of storytelling and the beauty of visual expression. Her books are not just for children; they are for anyone who cherishes the magic of a well-told story and the allure of captivating illustrations.

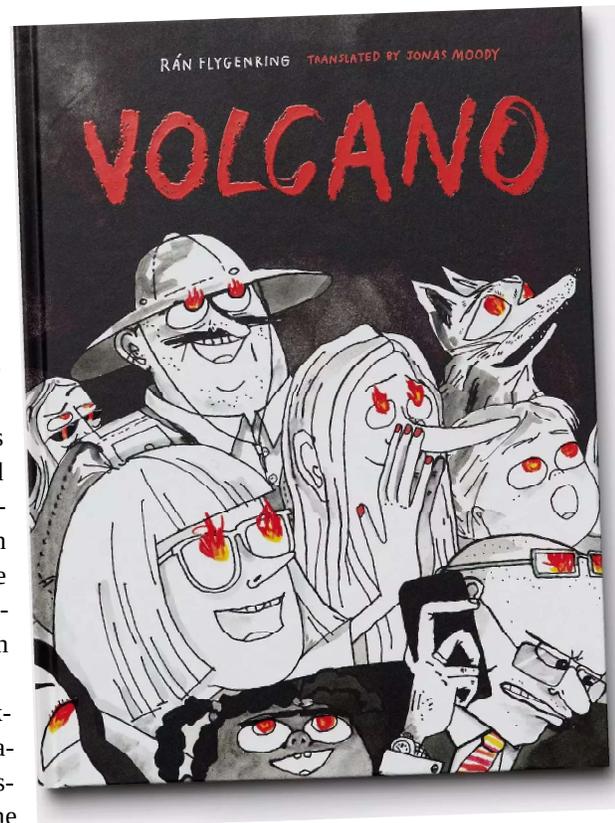
Flygenring's recognition by the Nordic Council is a significant milestone in her career, serving as an acknowledgment of her immense talent and contribution to literature and art. This accolade, however, represents more than just a personal achievement. It is a testament to the power of storytelling in creating connections across different realms. Flygenring's narratives bridge the gap between fantasy and reality, weaving tales that transport readers into worlds where imagination and the natural world intertwine seamlessly. Her stories are a conduit through which readers of all ages can explore complex themes, such as the relationship between humanity and nature, in an accessible and engaging manner.

Moreover, Flygenring's work exemplifies the role of children's literature in shaping perspectives and fostering a deeper understanding of the world. Her stories encourage curiosity, empathy, and a sense of wonder, qualities that are essential not only for young minds but for all who seek a richer engagement

with the world around them. The universal appeal of her stories lies in their ability to touch the hearts and minds of readers, regardless of age, inviting them to see the world through a lens of creativity and compassion.

Flygenring's style is characterized by a blend of whimsy and depth, merging playful imagery with thoughtful narratives. This combination captures the imagination of children while providing layers of meaning that adults can appreciate. Her illustrations, rich in detail and color, complement her storytelling, creating a holistic experience that is both visually stunning and intellectually stimulating.

The recognition by the Nordic Council highlights the significance of Flygenring's work in the broader context of literature and arts. It underscores the importance of storytelling as a medium for exploring and understanding our world. Flygenring's books are not just stories; they are bridges that connect the realms of imagination, reality, humanity, and nature, demonstrating the transformative power of art and narrative in our lives. □



Rán Flygenring's award winning book can be ordered online at angustura.is Please visit the author's webpage at ranflygenring.com

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