



MILLENNIAL

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MILLENNIAL PULP 2022

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A NOTE FROM THE EDITOR

Dear Reader,

Here at Millennial Pulp, our goal is to share art with the world, art that may otherwise clutter desk drawers and never see the light of day. Every poem, story, song, and artwork within our pages was crafted with blood, sweat, and maybe even a few tears; and it means a lot to our artists that you took the time to check it out.

We would first like to thank our contributors, without you there would be no magazine. Art is about taking a part of yourself and making it tangible, putting it down on paper, and letting it take on a life of its own. It becomes something more than alive, but less than living. It becomes art, and we are beyond grateful that you decided to share a part of yourselves with us.

And finally to our staff, who deserve the most heartfelt thank you of all. When we started this adventure at the beginning of 2020, we had no idea how strange the world would become, but our team worked tirelessly to ensure volume 3 would be the best version of itself. Thank you for helping build this platform, where unheralded voices can be heard.

Thanks for reading, we hope you enjoy!
Isaac Russo and the MP team

POETRY BY DAVID E. WILLIAMS
IN THE BEGINNING . . .

They said,
I know what
Let's get drunk
And fuck
And make pug ugly
Awful babies –
Cause that there seemed like it would work –
And
BEHOLD!
They were as Gods! –
Who worked all day
For bigger
Meaner Gods
Who'd let em sharecrop

FICTION BY ROSIE GARLAND & MEG POKRASS

MILLINERY DURING A PERIOD OF ADJUSTMENT

After initial confusion in the collapsed cities, Opal filled the time by making hats. Her favourite was the one she called the Swank Vat. It opened and closed like a little security safe, perfect for boyfriends to insert love notes and women to insert checks for goods. Opal wore her Vat-Hat to the arts fair.

Customers loved her creations: jewellery made from old computer circuit boards, cufflinks of electrical wire twisted in the shape of miniature lawnmowers, shell necklaces and hand-blown lightbulb earrings. And of course, her famous hats.

‘It’s good to have a broad imagination,’ she said.

They gushed and cooed and gave her money, which she folded and wove into mittens of crinkling presidents’ faces. They gushed and cooed some more, then paid her properly in bread and pork rinds. She drove a hard bargain, they said.

The new world was better, Opal decided. Soon, there’d be electricity, clean water, and trees again. She refused to get nostalgic for the world before, but a tree would be nice. Something to break up the view of snapped buildings.

Next week she’d take a new job. She could be anything she damn well wanted: the oldest waitress at Hooters, with the chest of a pokey thirty-year-old. The marchioness of animal pelts. A flying taxi driver. Something that paid in vodka, a potent tranquilizer whenever her belief in the point of survival started to sag.

FICTION BY ROSIE GARLAND & MEG POKRASS
THE DEATH OF PAPA THE CLOWN

After Papa drowned, we needed a way to draw off the smoke of his farewell. Wet clown burns messy. The fog that rose from him filled the house and we couldn't see each other. Couldn't tell mother from son, uncle from daughter, and that's the way it always had been. The way it should be. So we built the chimney and cleared out more than smog. Guided by instinct and hunger, from wrong to right, we returned to our proper situations.

Uncle unswallowed his sword, carrying it to the backlot to resume the proper business of cutting wood. My sister and I laid down our juggling balls and declared that we felt ready to bake a cake. There were many embarrassments to settle. *Remember those jokes?* asked Mama, beardless. In a chorus, we recited Papa's riddles. Crumpled them up and stuffed them into the fireplace. Empty laughs filtered up the chimney, so far as to be gone forever.

FICTION BY GRACE SCHWENK

MANY HATS

The Dark Gray Carhartt Beanie

that you found at the top of the family coat closet.

Back in high school, when your mom barely had enough to buy you what you needed, let alone what you wanted. The mountain town casual style was popular. Everyone at school was wearing these beanies. Dark gray and black were the most common ones because they could be matched to any outfit. But you saw some people wearing baby blue ones, bright orange ones, and even rose pink ones. You made a mental note to ask for a rose pink beanie for Christmas. The color reminded you of the painting of the Bitterroot wildflower your mom has hanging in the living room. The painting that was given to her by her grandmother. The only item she took when she packed up the car and left your dad.

It was a dreary December day and fluffy snowflakes were beginning to sprinkle from the sky. Going into her usual panic, your mom asked you for help shoveling the driveway. She always wanted to clear the driveway before the neighbors walked on the freshly fallen snow and left footprints. As if their footprints would remain on the driveway for millions of years like the footprints of the dinosaurs in the desert. You were irritated because your older sister, Fallon, told your mom she was going to a movie with friends and didn't have to help. If only you were more of an extrovert like your sister, you wouldn't be stuck at home wasting your life away doing chores.

You grudgingly trudged over to the coat closet and pulled down the bin of miscellaneous winter gear. Ruffling through Santa hats, scarves knitted by your Aunt Mary, and mismatched gloves, you lay your eyes on the Dark Gray Carhartt Beanie. Gray the color of the clouds that took over the sky the afternoon you watched a June thunderstorm on the porch while reading *Jane Eyre*. Gray the color of your Grand-

ma's hair in a bun as she swept you in a hug, telling your mom to stay as long as she needs. Gray the color of the stones that lay beneath the trickling clear water of Bass Creek.

Your eyes go wide and you let out a gasp. How has this been here the entire time just wilting away? Your heart begins to flutter with excitement and you make a mad dash for your room, gently placing the beanie on your dresser. You don't wear it outside to shovel the driveway because you don't want to possibly ruin it before you wear it to school on Monday. You go back to the bin, shove a Santa hat that smells like dust onto your head, and head outside to help your mom shovel the driveway.

The Light Gray Carhartt Beanie
that you borrowed from your older sister and never
gave back.

"Your big head is going to stretch it out," Fallon said when you first asked if you could borrow it for your date with Troy. You rolled your eyes at her insult, but did manage to swallow your comment about how her head is bigger. By now you knew better than to make her mad when you wanted something. After ten minutes of pleading she finally gave in when you promised to cover for her the next time she crawled out the window and disappeared to who knows where.

Excitement welled up inside of you as you thought about how the Light Gray Carhartt Beanie was a perfect match for the sweater you were wearing on your date with Troy. He's the kind of guy who notices even the smallest of details when it comes to appearance. He always wears blue sweaters that his mom buys him because he claims they make his eyes pop.

The beanie bobbed on your head as the two of you hiked around Holland Lake up to the falls. Growing up, before your dad got bad, he used to take you hiking all the time. He called you Little Mountain Goat as you always zoomed your way up the trail. With the spirit of Little Mountain Goat still inside you and the strength you gained from running cross country, you thought of this as more of a walk in nature

rather than a hike. Troy, on the other hand, was huffing and puffing his way up the trail. You tried to distract Troy from becoming annoyed with how you chose an uncomfortable activity for the first date by telling him about the proposal you saw at the falls.

“Fallon and I had just reached the top when the guy dropped down to one knee,” you said. “It was so beautiful.” Troy nodded his head to acknowledge your story but didn’t say anything. You went back to thinking about how in love the couple looked as he slid the ring on her finger. It was on that day you decided you would only say yes to a man if he asked to marry you at a waterfall.

You ended up reaching the falls ten minutes before Troy because he became a turtle through the muddy section. He slowly trudged along after you because he didn’t want to get his new Nike shoes muddy. It bothered you a little bit how he was looking down at his shoes the whole time rather than out at the gorgeous lake. You pushed that thought to the back of your mind when he called you pretty, told you he liked how your hat matched your sweater, and leaned in for a kiss at the waterfall.

The Sage Green Carhartt Beanie

that you bought with the money your mom gave you for gas. You decided it was time for a new beanie when the Light Gray Carhartt Beanie started to feel a little loose. You thought to yourself how maybe Fallon was right about the size of your head after all.

With your last two beanies being gray, you needed a spark of color in your wardrobe. Sage green was your choice because it reminds you of everything that you love. The color of the pine trees that wave at you as you hike up Trappers Peak. The caterpillar you found with Fallon when you were playing outside in the lilac bushes. The two of you managed to keep it alive in a pencil box for a week before your mom found it and made you take it outside. The lilypads up on Elbow Lake that serve as the beach chairs for turtles reclining in the sun. You and Fallon spent hours trying to catch these

turtles before they would dart off into the safety of the water while your dad fished for pike. Your bright green long distance racing spikes that you swear are the reason you ran a personal record fast enough to land you a spot in the state meet.

While sage green reminds you of everything you love, it also reminds you of all the things that you hate. The color of the broken bottle that your dad smashed against the wall the morning your mom told him she was leaving. The color of the sweater Troy bought you for Christmas because he said it would make your eyes pop. The color of the grass the day you twisted your ankle at the national cross country meet and had to drop out of the race. The color of Fallon's broken eyes as she glanced at you and your mom waving goodbye before she entered the doors of the rehabilitation center.

The Sage Green Carhartt Beanie reminds you of everything pertaining to life, nature, and growth. It also reminds you of sickness, greed, and lost ambition. By now you know it all just depends upon how you choose to wear the beanie.

The Straw Fly Fishing Hat

that your Grandpa used to wear while out casting on the West Fork of the Bitterroot River. The straw hat has a red and orange embroidered band that wraps around it where flies can rest until they are ready to be tied. There is a chin string that comes down to keep the hat from disappearing into the water in the midst of the excitement of a bite. The hat is wrinkled and worn around the rim from your Grandpa's many fishing adventures.

You found the hat hanging from a nail and collecting dust and spiderwebs at the cabin. It was the summer after Fallon got out of rehab and asked if you would learn how to fly fish with her. The two of you began your fly fishing studies by watching *A River Runs Through It* on VCR while curled up in a cheetah blanket at the cabin. The next day you went out to the shed and dug out all of your Grandpa's old fly fishing gear. You had been practicing how to cast and learned how to tie flies with the help of videos from the internet. All you

needed were the poles, a river, and a fish to bite.

Fallon was busy tying a fly when you ran back inside to grab your sunglasses from the table. As you grabbed them, your Grandpa's Straw Fly Fishing Hat caught your eye. You yanked it off the nail and placed it on your head. Looking at your reflection in the window, you thought you looked like the women in the fly fishing magazines you had parsed. Hair tied back in a braid with a few loose strands out to frame the face. The look of the hat on top of your head gave you an artificial feeling. You took it off, walked through the squeaky screen door of the cabin, and handed it to Fallon.

"You don't want to wear it?" she asked.

"It doesn't fit on my head," you lied back to her. She flashed a smirk at you and you knew she was amused once again by the size of your supposed big head. She placed the hat on top of her head and looked like the next Paul MacLain. You always thought of yourself more as a Norman MacLain anyway. Fallon tucked her fly into the band of the hat and the two of you set out for the river to fly fish.

The Vintage Red Felt Hat

that you bought from the basement of an antique shop one rainy Saturday afternoon. You walked around with your mom and Fallon, oohing and ahing at all of the hidden treasures in need of a dusting. Your favorite antique was the standing mount of an antelope with Christmas lights wrapped around its horns.

Just when the three of you were about to leave, Fallon pointed to a sign that read "More Items Downstairs" with an arrow pointing down creaky wooden steps. Emerging from the steps into the basement took you back in time to a room filled with clothes from every decade. There was a bright white pair of moon boots, fur coats, and even flapper dresses. You see a table filled with beautiful hats and your eyes immediately land on the Vintage Red Felt Hat. It caught your attention against the gray, brown, and black hats.

"I'm getting this," you say to Fallon while picking it up in your hands. Turning over the price tag, your eyes go

wide and you shake your head to tell her never mind. Just then the short little old lady who runs the antique store popped out from behind the row of fur coats. Fallon looked at you with a mix of surprise and fear. The little old lady didn't make any sound coming down the creaky steps. It was as if she was a ghost of one of the many antiques who just floated down them instead.

"I will give it to you for half off," she said while adjusting her horn-rimmed glasses, "if you take the antelope off of my hands." She explained how she hadn't been able to sell the antelope for over ten years. She wanted to get rid of it to make room for new furniture she was picking up for an estate sale. Fallon told her it was a deal before you had the chance to object. Your mom wasn't too happy about the new decoration that would be going in her living room.

"Think of it as a Christmas decoration," Fallon told your mom with a wide smile. Your mom rolled her eyes and told Fallon she would be shoveling the driveway by herself for a while.

The Vintage Red Felt Hat sits safe and secure at the top of your closet until you one day decide to wear it on your date with Troy. You wore a black dress, red heels, red lipstick, and the Vintage Red Felt Hat.

The two years you spent with Troy didn't exactly live up to what you expected love to be. You wanted to go hiking with him, spend Saturday mornings strolling at the Farmer's Market, and make pies with him the day before Thanksgiving. He wanted you to keep up on your highlights, party with his friends after their football games, and be there to drive him home when he had a bit too much to drink.

A week after your two-year anniversary, he made reservations at the fancy sushi bar in downtown Missoula. The two of you were celebrating a week late because he bailed on your date to see *Breakfast at Tiffany's* a week ago at the Wilma Theater. He said something about a quadruple overtime when he called to cancel. You were angry, but you took Fallon to the theater with you instead. Although you were annoyed with him, you could see he was trying to make it up to

you with the dinner reservations. You couldn't wait for him to pick you up and see your new Vintage Red Felt Hat. It made you feel like Holly Golightly – classy and elegant.

Troy rolled up to the curb ten minutes late. He honked the horn three times to signal his arrival. Your mom furrowed her brows and put her hands on her hips as he honked. She did this every time. You sped out the door before you had to listen to another lecture about treating a lady with respect. As you were about to open the passenger door of his black Mercedes AMG, the tinted window rolled down and you saw the head of his best friend, Mack, poke out.

"In the back," Mack said as he pointed to the back seat with his thumb. Troy leaned in over Mack's head and pointed to the back while offering a laugh.

"Mack got bored so I let him tag along," Troy called. "We're gonna go grab some pizza instead." You stood on the sidewalk and stared into Troy's blue eyes for what seemed like the length of a marathon. Taking off your Vintage Red Felt Hat, you continued to stare at him as he repeated his command to get in the back seat.

"No, I don't think I will," you said, finally feeling like you reclaimed your voice. "We're done here." You told him to have a nice life and spun around so hard your left red heel snapped. Mack burst out with laughter and pointed his finger at you while you limped your way back to the house. You never turned back to see if Troy was laughing too. You just heard the sound of his car speeding away when you reached your front door. You went back inside, kicked off the heels, and slumped down on the couch. Fallon came out of her room at the sound of the front door slamming.

"Wanna go get some ice cream?" she asked you. You nodded your head yes, but didn't say anything. You slipped on a pair of running shoes you left in the living room after your morning run and got up to follow Fallon out the door.

"Do you think he's gonna want some?" you asked her, pointing to the antelope now perched in the living room. Fallon laughed, happy to see that you were taking your breakup with Troy better than she expected. You often told her about

how you could see him proposing at a waterfall.

“Probably not,” she replied, “but I’m sure mom will want to come.” Your mom was already out in the living room before Fallon even finished her sentence.

“I’ll drive,” she said.

The Red Wilson Cap

that a younger and quieter version of your mom wore when she was working outside. After she left, the red house with the green tin roof fell into ruins. With no one to trim the lilac bushes, they became a chaotic mess of purple and green. The whimsical leaves of the whispering willow fell off one by one like tears rolling off the cheek. Spring came and the leaves never grew back. Now the willow tree stands as a spectral pillar next to the house with a few red paint chips caught in its bare branches. The soft green grass dried up under the summer sun without a sprinkler on each section like clockwork. Dandelions took charge of the lawn you and Fallon used to run through with bare feet.

“At least dandelions provide nectar for the bees,” your mom said to you, as the two of you drove in a car on the interstate past your childhood home. You were running errands and next on the list was to drop off a box of items at Goodwill. The only way to the Goodwill was on the interstate past the place where your dad lived with his new wife. You hated driving past it. You hated to see how trashy the place looked now. It was such a cool piece of land when your mom lived there. You didn’t understand how your dad could just let it go. How her seven years of hard work became one with the wind.

“Will you check in the donations for me,” your mom asked while pulling out her cell phone. “I need to remind Fallon to turn the crockpot down to low.” You nodded your head at your mom, gently closed the car door, and opened the rear door to her green Subaru Outback. This was her dream car. Your dad never let her buy one while they were married because he didn’t want his wife driving a “hippy” car. She didn’t have any money of her own to argue. Your mom bought it a year after she left your dad, covered the back in bumper stick-

ers, and only referred to it as Oatmeal. Fallon claims she loves Oatmeal more than her own daughters.

As you pulled out the cardboard box from the back of Oatmeal, you saw the Red Wilson Cap sitting on top of the pile of items destined for a second life. Your mom hadn't worn the Red Wilson Cap in years. You glanced in the rearview mirror to make sure she wasn't watching, then stuffed the Red Wilson Cap into your armpit under your sweatshirt. After handing the box to the donation collector, you jumped back into the car and listened to your mom talk about the one time Fallon forgot to turn the crockpot down for twenty minutes.

When you got home, you crept off to your room and pulled the hat out from under your armpit. There were sweat stains around the rim and the thread of the white lettering that read "Wilson" was unraveling. You took your hair out of your ponytail, tied it into a low bun, and placed the Red Wilson Cap on your head. Looking in the mirror, you saw a glimpse of your mom before the divorce. A version of your mom trimming the lilac bushes, moving the sprinkler about the yard, and playing soccer in the green grass with you and Fallon.

You think you look like your mom with the Red Wilson Cap on. No one else would agree. Your mom thinks you look like your Aunt Mary, your Grandma says you look just like her, and Fallon claims you were adopted.

Moving your gaze from the mirror to your window, you saw your mom in the backyard kneeling beside her rosebush. She was busy cutting off a pink rose. She always cut off the best roses, put them in a mason jar, and placed them on your dresser.

"This will be my new hiking hat," you say out loud to yourself as you glance in the mirror again.

The Royal Blue Boston Marathon Beanie
that your dad sent you in the mail for your birthday last year. You started to see him less and less after the divorce. Now hardly at all. Every year he still manages to send you a birthday present in the mail along with a card that has turtles

on the front.

The beanie soon became your trusty companion on your winter runs. You make sure never to forget it when the weather drops below freezing after that one time your ear swelled up. It took forty-five minutes of laying on the floor next to the heater for your ear to swell back down.

You puffed up like a peacock when the guy writing down times told you he liked your hat at the finish line of the Snow Joke Half Marathon. Making sure not to correct his implied thought that you actually ran the Boston Marathon, you smiled and said thank you between breaths. You went home with the thought of Boston in the forefront of your mind. Imagine having more to say about Boston than just a smile and a thank you when someone told you they liked your hat. Later that day, you got on the Missoula Marathon website to register for your first full marathon. If you could run the Missoula Marathon fast enough, then that time would land you a spot in the Boston Marathon.

“The Boston Marathon is the pinnacle of distance running,” your mom said over your shoulder as she checked to see what was preventing you from coming outside to help her shovel the driveway.

“Did you ever think about running a marathon before you had us?” you asked her. She offered you a half smile and told you maybe once or twice. You often think about how your mom was a runner before she got pregnant and married your dad. She gave up running as life got busy with kids, a job, and the constant need to shovel the driveway. As your mom disappeared into her room to find her coat, you threw on your Royal Blue Boston Marathon Beanie, and dashed out the door to start shoveling the driveway before she got out there.



ARTIST SPOTLIGHT

THE

SABAHAT

QUADRI
COLLECTION

ABOUT THE ARTWORK

Farheen was painted amidst COVID precautions, when Sabahat took a friend on a tour of a sun-filled Karachi. *Better days* shows the harsh reality of lockdown, with shops shuttered and a population seeking income on the streets. Finally, the cover art *Emerging from Nowhere* uses spontaneous splatters of indigo to dream of a remote sanctuary deep in a forest.

ARTWORK BY SABAHAT QUADRI
EMERGING FROM NOWHERE



painting

ARTWORK BY SABAHAT QUADRI
BETTER DAYS



painting

ARTWORK BY SABAHAT QUADRI
Farheen



painting

POETRY BY BENJAMIN NARDOLILLI
THE GOOD LIFE REVIEW

The promise of an autumn house has collapsed, travel
and moves are suspended, meanwhile, I continue to sweat
in my apartment, following along the dusty blades
of fans swirling all day, they cut the humidity and I breathe

Speculative fiction keeps things going, supplying guesses
of the world outside, where laughter chimes and smoke rises,
the origins are hidden, who is sending them my way?
I would go out to see, but the trees are making me paranoid

When tales fail, I fatten up, indulging in a fantasy fueled
with caked-up horrors, there's a fire in my pocket now,
no need to fear the future, I'm living through foreshocks of it:
everything coin-operated, pennies grand little things again

Filth and flies bring me back to the present day, I cling
to the remains of the dish soap in order to clean what I can,
purging containers of quince over the kitchen sink
and trying to remember what I bought all this old fruit for

FICTION BY ABAGAIL BELCASTRO

THE HOARDER

“And what’s its significance that you need to keep this?” I ask. It’s the first question we learn on the very first day of our courses. The question that opens the door to memories often crumpled under years and years of suppression. It is our mantra, our creed. And our clients resent it. A harrumph of steam erupts from Gorgo’s nostrils, filling the cavern with a sulfuric tang. I’m glad I’ve remembered my mask this week as I flutter my hand around my face to dissipate it. Gorgo does it so he doesn’t have to look at me, a sure indicator that we’re getting somewhere.

“I just like it.” He answers a bit sullenly. The big eye facing me is half closed and narrowed.

“It’s good to like things,” I say gently. It’s a conversation we have weekly, the fine line between enjoying owning something and letting it consume everything. Gorgo’s tail flicks around one of the piles in a protective maneuver, as if I’m going to throw out his whole collection of historic detritus in one move. I continue softly. “But we’re talking right now about a throne you can’t sit in, the gilt is long gone, and it has no historical provenance. And as we discussed last week, you already have a throne that you know was occupied by Elizabeth I. With a seat of such renown in your collection, why do you have to keep this one, too?”

The old throne stands between us, one of the larger pieces I’ve selected out of the hoard today to see if he’ll be comfortable throwing it away. We were moving along at a good pace for several weeks. But last week, I’d suggested throwing away this throne, and Gorgo had a bit of a regress.

“I’m just like this,” he tries. Which is his usual answer when he’ll have to dig deep into his own psyche. “My kind...”

“Yes, you are predisposed. But you know you aren’t

defined by your genetics.”

The piles rise like giant stalactites, much of the content indecipherable in the gloom of the flickering torches Gorgo lights with his own breath for my benefit. He can see in the dark, I can't. I appreciate the gesture, along with the silver pitcher of water always waiting next to the rock he's thought to spread a Persian rug on. A human-sized goblet encrusted in gems is always next to the pitcher, a relic of some long lost age that should be in a museum under glass and in climate control. Instead I use it to drink the mineral-tinged water that flows deep within Gorgo's cave because the ash levels on the floor make me cough.

It's a misnomer in our society that Hoarders are selfish dirty creatures that only think about acquiring more junk. It's really the opposite; they care so much about others. It's evident in Gorgo's hospitality. He wants me to be comfortable. Even when he knows I'm here to make him throw things away. It's really that Hoarders like Gorgo care too much about so many things that even the most insignificant scrap of an old receipt will get imbued with a memory. Like whatever memory Gorgo has attached to the fake throne.

Even in the torchlight, it's clear that the gilt is simply gold paint over wood that has long ago been rubbed away from being buried under the rest of Gorgo's obsessions. And yet, in the reflection of his eye, it's clear to see the pain it's taking for him to look at it as valueless.

“Does it have a family importance?” I pry. He shakes his large head, the scales glinting with the movement. A few are missing around the eyes as if he's been scratching, a usual sign of stress in dragons. He sits back on his haunches, the tail coming a little away from the closest pile. There is a story mounting, like the fire in his belly when he's mad, a long and perfect memory of this throne. But I'd rather him not tell it. I want him to decide on his own. So I move on to the pile his tail has vacated. “Tell me about this.” I pull a singed book into the torchlight.

“Oh, I haven’t seen that in years!” He exclaims, plucking it gently from my hands with two large talons. “It was given to me as a birthday gift. I did love Charles Dickens.” He flicks through a few pages with a talon, the book off to the side so he can focus on the tiny print. “It’s a first edition, you know.”

“That sounds very important.” I note.

“Oh yes.”

“I notice you said you loved Charles Dickens. As in the past. Do you still love him?”

Gorgo sighs and a sulfuric waft blows over my head.

“It got silly, the serials. And after a while, all his books seemed the same.”

I gesture gently for the book and he lets me pluck it from his claws. The cover is blackened and barely readable, and most of the pages are streaked with soot. I open the front cover and look for the publication date, but it’s been marred by stray embers. “Unfortunately, this won’t be worth anything anymore.” I show him the burn hole where the publication should be. “No one will be able to corroborate its value.”

He nods gently, his reptilian eyes closing and the large mouth pulled back in sad resignation. “I was going to give it to a museum someday.”

“They won’t accept a book in this condition.”

“You can throw it away, then, I suppose.”

“Do you want to keep it because it has value to you?”

“No. No.” He says quickly, “I kept it because it was a first edition. I have eighty copies of *Oliver Twist*. That one was just special because it was first. Literally the first that ever came off the press.”

I take the once-priceless book along with a milk crate of mouse-eaten opera costumes he’s agreed are no good anymore and deposit them in the large dumpster waiting at the cave entrance. He can’t watch things go into the dumpster yet. Though we’ve been working together for the better part of a year, I’ve yet to get him to participate in the cleanup.

“Thank you, Gorgo.” I say when I return, “That was hard for you and I appreciate your effort.”

A tear the length of a chair steams from under his eyelid, and I sidestep to get between his front legs as it falls with a horrendous splash to my right, running rivulets into the ashy floor. I take the heat glove from my coat pocket and put it on so I can pat his front foot in empathy. His words are marred by the tears he’s trying not to shed, but a few like “should have kept it better, and “wasteful dragon,” are mostly decipherable.

“Would you like to stop for today?” I ask.

“No. I mean yes. But no.” A series of splashes on either side of me says we’ve hit maximum waterworks, and I’m glad for my galoshes. I pet his foreleg and tell him how important it is to feel whatever he’s feeling as a greyish pond forms around us. I remind him that grief for objects is real and valid, and after about five minutes, he’s pulled himself together again. I go back to my rug and sit down on what is now a soggy Persian relic to wait while he slithers gracefully through the piles to the back of the cave to wash his face in one of the streams.

My parents thought I was crazy the day I came home and told them I wanted to specialize in the psychology of Hoarding. It was the capital letter that got them since it meant that I’d be dealing with the big stuff. The dangerous stuff. Psychologists of Hoarding repeatedly get maimed or need skin grafts. Not because their clients mean to hurt them, but just because a dragon’s emotional obsession with their hoard is so deep. Gorgo’s had most of the things in these piles longer than we’ve had the printing press. To have to throw them away or even acknowledge their presence can be gut-wrenching. Other psychologists have gone mad themselves after walking through caverns filled with pile after pile of destroyed artifacts. There are only so many ruined first editions some psychologists can throw in the dumpsters before turning on their clients in anger. This is, of course, terribly

detrimental to the patient's emotional health, and, in most cases, deadly for the psychologist.

But the dragons want the help, especially ones like Gorgo. With his children having their own collections and his wife moving into a cave down the road because his hoard was too big to accommodate hers and his in the same space, he was living a lonely existence.

I stare past the piles as I wait. The evidence of what was at one time an organized and well-cared for collection lines the walls. It's clear that Gorgo was a Collector and not a Hoarder long ago. The ash-covered shelves are packed floor to ceiling with troves of flammable gems; perhaps if he had stopped there, he would have been alright. But the props are what got him, the discarded theater costumes, set pieces, old scripts. And then there was the emergence of the printing press, pumping out books by the thousands, and he had to have one of each. Once the first pile began, it was so much easier to make the second, and the third, and fourth....

While it's true that dragons all have the Hoarding gene – tralizoma 22, to be precise – and in their past literally did sit on giant piles of collected shiny bits like enormous reptilian magpies, the dragons of today have elevated their hoards to be caves of research and archives. Most dragons carefully curate to certain specialties – rare books, ancient relics, manuscripts – and some only collect from a particular culture or country. Gorgo's wife, Niera, only collects Ethiopian jewelry, which is a sight to behold and has been lovingly displayed in thousands of velvet-lined boxes with UV-protected glass. Scholars and jewelry enthusiasts come from all over the world to see her collection.

I suppose that's the fine line I've been trying to get Gorgo to understand. He still believes he's a Collector. He hasn't quite come to the acceptance that he's crossed the ravine into Hoarding, even though the scholars and art students stopped coming at least fifty years before I was born. He lamented it often in our first sessions, the lines that used

to trail all the way down the path. Young students with their sketch pads and portfolios ready to be inspired by the theater costumes of the Globe; academics with their glasses and eager faces, nearly vibrating with the anticipation of seeing Emily Bronte's handwritten manuscript or tracing the tight script over the vellum upon which Shakespeare created theatrical history.

I had been lucky enough to unearth at least those two items in good condition, and Gorgo agreed to donate them. But the costumes were riddled with rodent holes and sulfur burns and had gone on to the great dumpster in the sky. The flood of Gorgo's tears that afternoon almost swept me into his underground stream.

I sip from the ancient goblet as Gorgo's shadow appears between the piles, followed first by the arc of his leathery wings and then his face. It's always amazing to me how his large front feet never crush his piles, though the one we've been working through has slightly fallen in an avalanche of scattered burnt pages and indecipherable mounds. An untrained observer would think he didn't care about any of it based on how it's been cared for. But his prudently placed steps as he winds his way through the maze to our little clean area tells the truth. Every object unearthed has a story. Like the *Oliver Twist* edition, two hundred years may have passed since he's looked at it, but he remembers.

One of my professors once joked that dragons are the ultimate elephant. Their memories are not only long, but intensely accurate, which is what makes working on their hoards so terribly painful. Asking them to give up an object is really asking them to sacrifice a piece of their life to a dumpster. And as I found out accidentally, sacrificing their memories to me.

My mother had taken me to a library program as a child where dragons would "read" to children on the lawn. But there was no book, the dragon's story was her own memories. It was a simple, sweet, story about a little lost dog

that the dragon befriended. The dragon had been so lonely, and the dog approached her cave all skin and bones and sad looking. She could have eaten the dog, she told us, for she was hungry, too. But they shared that, the dog and her, and so she took him in and let him drink from the pool in the back of her cave. They became companions, she and the dog. She named him Fido, and he slept in the crook of her tail. Her words played out inside our heads like a film in the movie theater. Or at least inside my head.

I found out much later, and mostly from the sensational articles in the local papers, that the dragon who had told her story on the day I was present could no longer tell it. Had seemed to have lost all recollection that she had ever known the story at all. I had the story now, the colors and faces and dialogue as fresh and new as if it were happening in front of me. I never told my mother, but I threw a tantrum any time she wanted to take me to any more dragon readings. If it happened again, perhaps I'd be found out. I'd be taken away as a freak of nature. Such is the way children think. But the dragon's memory persisted in me, the image of the dog curled into the crook of her scaled tail.

As I grew, I wondered, how many memories did dragons have that would be lost when they died? Important memories; tales of history and places lost to disasters, to landscapes replaced, the true nature of historical figures forever unknown. Dragons didn't often talk to people, especially those who'd become buried by their Hoards, so I began to seek them out, visiting their caves. I was careful to not let them tell me stories. Recollections, yes, and explanations of their objects or the people they had known, but never stories.

Those I encouraged them to tell others. To go to libraries and universities, to spread their fonts of knowledge to those who could write it down and keep it safe. It's how I came to know the breadth of their hoards, the length of their memories, and their collective lamenting at the state of their lonely lives. It was what made me want to be a psychologist in

the first place.

My dark secret came to light in my university program. It was an ethical dilemma for someone hoping to be a therapist, and one that no science seemed able to explain or do anything to cure. I failed so many exercises, but I wouldn't take the dragons' memories; those precious gems of history. It seemed too personal a thing, too intimate. And the community was small, I didn't want to be known as the memory stealer. I dropped out of the program and worked with humans, my career only a whisper of what I'd hoped for. Until Gorgo.

One of the oldest dragons in the area, Gorgo had been through almost every psychologist in the phone book, but the usual cajoling and thought-provoking questions that therapists depend on weren't enough to loosen his grip on the ever-expanding piles. If anything, he'd backpedal after a session, one time going so far as ripping open a library dumpster to save the outdated books they were throwing away. After the fifth psychologist ended up in the hospital burn unit, I got a call from the university.

They had a special case, and he was willing to try anything to get better. My secret could be the cure. Would I like to try?

The first time I went to Gorgo's cave, I wore the standard-issue mask and Tyvek suit, unsure of what to expect. I had been to many caves during the program, but none held a dragon's sulfuric fart to the Hoard that awaited in the darkness. We'd done a tour, mostly him showing off with great pleasure his mountains of relics and manuscripts. I had his intake forms and a file the size of the Gutenberg Bible, of which he was happy to show me his copy of for true size comparison, and we discussed an action plan. I explained my secret, and what the cost to him might be if he told me his memories.

"No price is too high for my wife to come home." He'd said, a large tear welling under his eyelid.

Eight months ago, he'd sacrificed his first memory, the weight of its reality so palpable I could smell and taste it. We'd unearthed an illuminated manuscript he'd been gifted from a thirteenth century monastery, given in offering to keep him from eating their sheep.

As his memory unfolded behind my eyes, the yeasty tang of hops and sweat rose off the monk's clothes as he handed a lanky, teenage-sized Gorgo the gilded pages. The landscape was green and untouched. The scent of woodsmoke and shit lingered in an air so quiet, it was barely disturbed by the baaing of sheep and twitter of birds. I gasped impolitely when it ended, hoping Gorgo couldn't sense my internal rapture. I had time-traveled for one brilliant jewel of a moment, experiencing a reality that no human alive ever would.

Gorgo's keen bright eyes had gone suddenly vague and glassy with forgetfulness. And I realized in a sweep of quickly souring ecstasy what responsibility I now had. This gem of knowledge was mine forever, to keep and protect as Gorgo had for so many centuries. But I wasn't a dragon. How could I hold onto it? Tell others a memory that wasn't mine? I wrote it down when I got home, both typed into the digital cloud and on pen and paper.

Gorgo was willing to donate the manuscript to the National Museum of Ireland once he couldn't remember why he'd been keeping it, and as one session turned into many, his Hoard diminished, and my mind filled.

He settles himself on the open patch of rock that we've spent the last six months of memories unearthing. I know he's happy with his progress, as he's been dusting the ash away from this open space diligently. He curls his tail around him like my house cat and settles his narrow reptilian head on his forefeet, the tears washed from his scales as he stares at me with his left eye. He sighs mightily, his mouth turned politely away so I'm not burned by the phosphorous plume. He gestures with his big head towards the throne.

"It's a theater prop. From the first performance of

Othello ever staged. The throne is all that's left of that performance, so you understand why I can't part with it."

"Have you considered donating it to the Globe Museum?" I ask.

"I called on them. They say they don't have room for it." His eye looks at the ceiling in a scoffing way. "But really, I think it's just that they don't want to talk to me anymore after my last donation."

The museum had sent their curator and professional movers to accept a shipping container's worth of historic props and backdrops that had been perfectly preserved in the darkness of Gorgo's cave. It had been a major breakthrough for Gorgo to know that the museum would be hosting a special exhibit in his honor as thanks for his enormous donation. He was downright jubilant, right up until the moment the movers were carting the boxes out to the truck. Pandemonium ensued, and it was the first time I had to don the fire-retardant trench coat I'd been issued my first day.

It was the thought of all those things going away where he couldn't look at them every day, Gorgo said later, after he'd calmed down and the fire department had doused the truck in spray foam. It took a few hours for him to tell me all the memories, but afterwards, he was willing to let the whole shipping container go.

"I can understand their position," I said carefully. "Replacing that truck was very expensive."

"I suppose. It was not graceful of me, my reaction. To be frank, I don't know what came over me."

"But the director was very professional in still hosting the exhibit in your honor."

"I know, I know. And I'm grateful, I am. I just wish they would take this, too. It would add to the exhibit."

"There is only so much floor space at the museum."

He harrumphs. "They just don't want to talk to me again."

I silently agree, but it won't do him good to tell him

so. "Have you considered that perhaps this throne's value is specific to you?"

His angular head swivels to look at me with both eyes. "Of course I have. That's the whole problem, isn't it?" The irises have to be almost cross-eyed for him to see me over the bridge of his nose. "Everything in here is only valuable to me." His tail waps the ground in frustration, a puff of ash covering the closest pile. He sighs. "There's only one way."

"I'd rather you do it on your own," I stress. "You can decide to part with it." The memories of dragons are heavy, pushing out my own, like my mother's birthday or how old I am. The scent of woodsmoke will charge me with the vivid recollections of a monk's bald head or the acrid smoking of a village freshly charred. But I have to think harder and harder to find the scout trip with my father or the family reunion barbecue.

But Gorgo shakes his head. "It works. And once I forget, I forget. How can you miss a thing you can't remember?"

How indeed? I want to say.

It's becoming more difficult to take them, and these days, I dread this moment. The journals in my office are taking over. Every bookshelf stuffed and a pile forming on the floor. I'm afraid my brain will just be Gorgo at the end of all this. The me that I am will become the me I was. But he puts his head down on his foreclaws and closes his large eyes for a moment, the memory gathering.

I wait silently, at once anticipating the bright clarity of this time travel and also dreading the responsibility of its keeping. But my mind becomes blank on its own accord, as open as possible to catch this precious thing as it falls out of the gentle rumble of his voice.

I close my own eyes and there's the young Gorgo, a quarter of his current size, following two other young dragons to the Globe in England. They perch on iron rods thick as trees at intervals along the theater's open roofline, the special seats for dragons installed after half the theater burnt down

when a patron in the upper gallery had a sulfur attack during a production of *Henry VIII*. Gorgo has one of the perches leaning up against the back wall by the stream, “saved” as he says, from the scrap yard after the Globe was demolished in 1644. I can see the actors on the stage, and the throne in the background, the summer sun glinting on its gold paint. Gorgo spins his tale, the bright reds of the actors’ clothes and the smell of piss and sweat and roasted chestnuts and skewered meat curling around the actors’ painted faces. The cries of the audience are deafening as they throw cheers and discarded chestnut shells in equal measure. I am there, in the biting autumn air of 1604, Gorgo’s history becoming mine forever. His voice fades, the young Gorgo blowing streams of fire high into the air in applause as the actors take their bows.

He opens his eyes and I open mine, and for a second there is the glassy vacancy in Gorgo’s face that means the memory is mine. Then his eyes return to their deep, knowing brilliance. “What were we discussing?”

I look into his old eyes, a pain in my chest at this thing he wants me to keep doing. “This throne.”

“That old thing?”

“Yes,” I say over the knot in my throat.

POETRY BY KUO ZHANG
AMERICAN DREAM

We sign, we sign, we sign, we sign.
The lawyer congratulates.
We have lunch
for the very first time
as home owners.

3 bedrooms,
3 bathrooms,
0.8 acre lot.

Until 11 years old,
my family lived in one room:
One bed for Mom and me.
Dad slept on the sofa,
feet hanging off.

Books stacked on top
of the refrigerator.

A tiny kitchen,
a squatting toilet.
A foldable round table
for dining, me doing homework,
Mom writing lesson plans, papers.

In the new house,
my husband murmurs,
“It would be perfect
if it has one more bedroom!”

ARTWORK BY DELTA NA
COEXIST



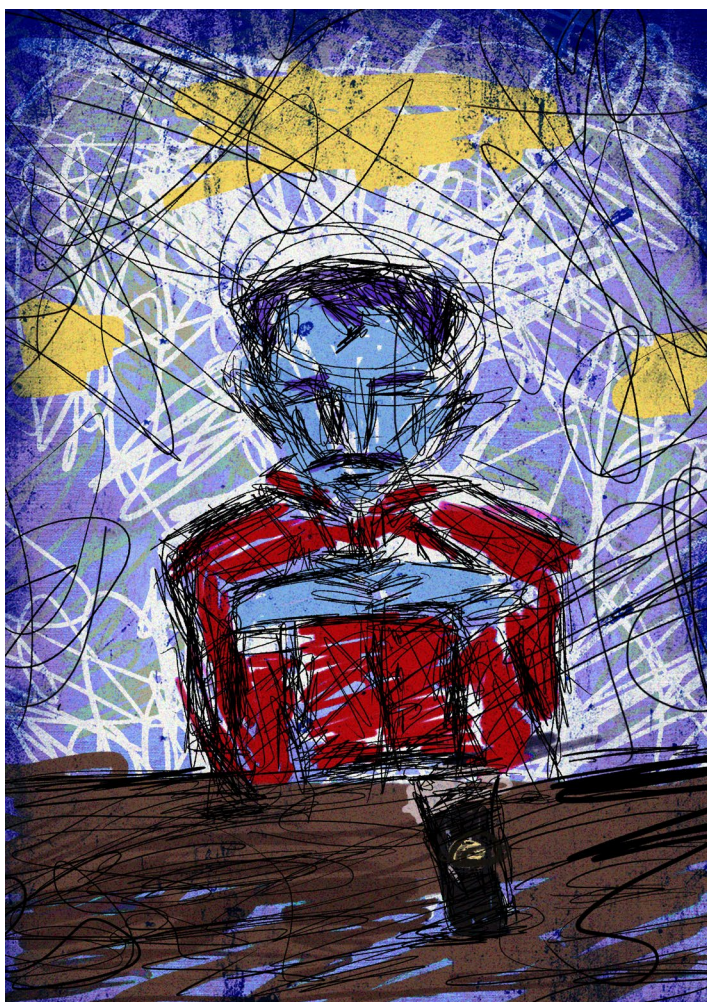
artwork

PHOTOGRAPHY BY SARAH DECKRO
WINDOW TO WHERE?



Photography
Panasonic Lumix fz1000

ARTWORK BY DAN ARSKY
A DIVE



Digital Painting
Neo-Expressionist Style

ARTWORK BY JORDAN JAMES
Is Life LONELY?



Collage

POETRY BY KATEY LINSKEY

FUCK YOU, BEZOS

AND ALSO ALL THE PICK-ME ASS BROS THAT DEFEND HIM FROM AFAR

the seeds get caught in a spiderweb
the makings of a secondary dandelion

the forest blushes with recent growth
softening after the fires

i walk through the burn and i can't comprehend
why the fire starts or what causes it to stop

half the forest is obliterated
ashed trees, smoked and black
like day-old coffee and cigs

but there are untouched trees, green,
just beyond my hands

i see snow across the mountain path
cool contrast to the fires sitting on the horizon

the destruction as unequal as it inexplicable

because on tuesday, bezos and some other assholes go to space

just as someone dies for lack of a dollar
the malaria meds the babe needs – out of reach

an overpriced dirty chai in new york brews at the same moment
men in bangalore hawk the original out of blistering tin cups

for a few cents, it's hard to make sense of paying
\$15 dollars for a fucking salad

someone else makes as much in a month
laboring in the sun, bending to pick the ingredients

why haven't we all burned?

DRAMA BY STEPHEN BAILY

TWEED AND DENIM

A PLAY IN ONE ACT

Characters

DAVID CRIBLER, a writer in his late twenties

LISA CRIBLER, his wife

JOE VADE, a writer in his late twenties

JANE VADE, his wife

MORTIMER WADD, a publisher

The action unfolds over a few hours, some while ago.

Scene I

A living room. A table and a mirror. DAVID CRIBLER, in a tweed jacket and tie, is checking his reflection in the mirror, while LISA CRIBLER looks on.

DAVID How do I look?

LISA Fine, fine – except your tie’s not straight. (*She adjusts it.*) There. Now calm down. Your butterflies are silly. What’s to fear? Mortimer Wadd won’t bite you.

DAVID I know – but the man’s a god of publishing!

LISA So?

DAVID So can you blame me for being nervous? I keep thinking he must have made a mistake – that I don’t rate this invitation.

LISA Stop right there. I hate it when you show so little confidence in yourself. It’s unmanly. Common sense should tell you you’re as qualified to sit in Wadd’s company as anyone. You’ve written a fine book – paid your dues – worked long and hard – and now you’re simply reaping the reward you’ve earned.

DAVID I guess.

LISA So don’t let me hear you bad-mouth yourself again.

Oh, I could spew when you do that. It turns our victory to vinegar. It makes a mockery of all my family's done for us so we could reach this moment.

DAVID Sorry.

LISA Just be proud you've lifted yourself up above the crowd. That's all I ask. Don't be your own worst foe – don't undermine yourself. Quick now, though – go, or you'll be late. No – hold on – I'll wake Mark up from his nap and take him to the park. We'll walk you to the subway.

She exits. He turns back to the mirror.

DAVID All the same, Mortimer Wadd – the gatekeeper of fame – has sent for me. For me! She's right, then – yes. I'm someone special now. I'm a success!

Blackout.

Scene 2

Another living room. JANE VADE, conspicuously pregnant, is seated knitting. Enter JOE VADE, in jeans and a work shirt.

JOE Okay, I'm heading up there now.

JANE But –

JOE What?

JANE You haven't changed your clothes.

JOE Yeah, so?

JANE You're not thinking of meeting with them dressed like that? You'll make a bad impression on them. At least put a tie on.

JOE You know how I feel about those nooses.

JANE But this is a really classy publisher – among the top ones.

JOE La-di-da. You think they'll call a cop on me?

JANE My point is, this is no printshop where they don't care if you dress like a slob.

JOE But I work in a printshop – it's my job, my trade, our bread and butter – so why shouldn't I look like it?

You see these hands? I couldn't get the ink off my fingers if I tried.

JANE Oh, that looks awful.

JOE You want me to hide them? Sorry. I won't. I'm proud of them. Fuck those uptown bastards if they think I'll suck up to them.

JANE If you take that attitude – walk in with a chip on your shoulder – you'd be better off not going.

JOE I'll behave, don't worry. But I'm goddamned if I'll shave or wear a striped tie just so I can pass for one of them. No – they can kiss my ass before I'll do that.

A cranky child is heard offstage.

JANE Zachary's awake.

JOE I'm going. It's nice out. Why don't you take him to the park?

JANE Joe, this is the big break we never thought would happen. For God's sake, don't spoil it.

JOE Relax. It's a piece of cake.

Blackout.

Scene 3

A park bench facing a sandbox offstage. LISA is reading at one end of the bench, and JANE is knitting at the other.

JANE Excuse me, but is that your little boy?

LISA What? Oh! Mark, let that go – give back that toy right now! . . . Is that your son he took it from?

JANE Yes.

LISA Mark's a handful, I'm afraid. You come here often, don't you?

JANE Now and then. I've seen you here before, too, I think.

LISA I don't mean to pry, but don't you shop at the organic co-op?

JANE I shouldn't, but I do. I panic when I think how

much more it costs, but I won't feed Zack processed foods. I'd rather die.

LISA Likewise. I'm Lisa Cribler.

JANE I'm Jane Vade. You live near here?

LISA (*pointing up*) On sixteen.

JANE Nice. I'd trade you gladly.

LISA Where do you live?

JANE On Schmutz Street, up five long flights. It must be awfully sweet to have an elevator.

LISA It's a treat we tend to take for granted.

JANE Well, it's neat your budget's up to it. To make ends meet, we have to live with steep stairs.

LISA Would you mind my asking what your husband does?

JANE He's kind of in transition now.

LISA He's out of work?

JANE Nothing like that. Joe's not the type to shirk employment. He works as a printer nights, and days at his own thing.

LISA Which is?

JANE He writes novels.

LISA You're kidding.

JANE Or at least he says they're novels. Personally, it dismays me how peculiar they are, but, in fact, he's finally been able to attract the interest of a publisher. You've heard of Tite and Wadd?

LISA Oh, this is too absurd. My husband – he writes novels, too – is there as we speak.

JANE What, at Tite and Wadd?

LISA Yes. They're this close to taking David's book.

JANE But Joe has an appointment with them now, too.

LISA No way this is possible. Pinch me.

JANE And yet here we sit, and I can't believe we've met

for nothing.

LISA Me neither. It's obvious this wants pursuing. Could you two join us for dinner?

JANE Yes!

LISA Good. We'll investigate what has to be the handiwork of fate.

Blackout.

Scene 4

An office. MORTIMER WADD sits behind a desk. The intercom buzzes.

WADD Yes, Midge? Who? David Cribler, is it? Send him in.

DAVID *enters diffidently.*

WADD Come in, come in. Sit down, my friend. How nice to meet you.

DAVID I can't tell you, sir, how honored I am –

WADD Quit that. Don't defer to me.

DAVID Your reputation –

WADD Please.

DAVID To be in the same room with you –

WADD You flatter me, but let me tell you straight off, so there's no misapprehension. Every author who joins me in this room is a colleague in my eyes. I mean that. From the veteran of twenty years on the best-seller list to the uncertain debut novelist like you, I treat them all as equals and I ask for the same treatment. Understand?

DAVID Of course, sir, and –

WADD Not "sir." Knock off the sir. You know my first name,

don't you?

DAVID Mortimer.

WADD Yes, but that's way too pompous. Call me Mort.
And, if I may, I'll call you by the short version of
your name – okay, Dave?

DAVID Yes, sir. I mean – I'm sorry – yes, sir, Mortimer – I
mean Mort.

WADD Good. Now let me say, before we talk about this
book of yours, that your credentials are impressive:
education in top schools – a fervent recommenda-
tion from your MFA program – publication in the
right magazines, the ones whose readers include
society's opinion leaders – and finally, a senior
agent at a long-established agency. All that is how
careers are manufactured, Dave. It shows us you're
a serious young knave – that you mean business.
Here, at Tite and Wadd, that's what we look for in
our authors.

DAVID God knows since I was a boy, sir – Mort – my goal,
that I've pursued with all my heart and soul, has
been to see my photo on the jacket of a hit book.

WADD Well, you're on the right track. It could happen
with this manuscript, provided you're flexible and
ready to be guided by me.

DAVID Ready? I'd give a kidney – twice – to have the ben-
efit of your advice.

WADD That's good, because – though highly promis-
ing – your novel cries out for rejiggering. The end's
weak, the beginning's a disaster, and in between,
things need to move much faster or you'll turn off
the reader. Don't look so crestfallen. These are mi-
nor problems. No great effort's called for to repair
them. Here. I've written some suggestions down.
Adhere to them and you'll soon have a volume fit
for bookstore shelves.

WADD hands DAVID a sheet of paper, which he peruses.
DAVID But this is brilliant! It astonishes me that I didn't think of this myself. How splendidly you link the end with the beginning.
WADD All I did was get where you'd have gotten yourself, kid, if you'd thought just a little harder. You planted the clues, and I followed them to their destination. In no way does this diminish your achievement. I assisted at the birth, you might say, but the issue remains, of course, bone of your bone and tissue of your tissue.
DAVID I don't know how to thank you for this.
WADD Here's how. Go on home and crank out these revisions quickly, then report back here.
DAVID Yes, sir – er – Mortimer – er – Mort!
Blackout.

Scene 5
The setting is unchanged.

WADD (*into the intercom*) Who's next, Midge? Ah, yes. I've been looking forward to meeting him. . . . He's weird? Well, I'll take your word for it. Send him along.
JOE enters stiffly.
JOE Vade.
WADD Wadd. Sit. You're one lucky young man.
JOE Oh, yeah? How's that?
WADD For the life of me, I can't recall the last time any manuscript has made it past initial screening here that came in over the transom.
JOE No shit.
WADD Yes. Check. You'll discover it's just a fluke we still

have a slush pile. They're pretty much extinct now. Indeed, I'll bet you no major publisher but us will read an unsolicited manuscript today.

JOE I'm speechless you're so generous.

WADD We try. And yet we share the prejudice that un-agented work comes with the kiss of death impressed on it. So that the odds against your book's attaining Tite and Wadd's imprint were – are – near astronomical – the more so as you've chosen not to fill the blanks in about yourself. I'm told that you wrote no cover letter.

JOE And so what? My background doesn't matter. If the plot of my book bores you, I could be the king of England, and you wouldn't like the thing a bit more.

WADD That may be. But all the same, I can't help noticing you put your name right there below the title.

JOE Well?

WADD To me, your logic leads to anonymity, if you pursue it to its end.

JOE Maybe you're right.

WADD But, since you don't hide who you are, what harm can there be in it if you share a few details about yourself? Such as where you grew up and went to school.

JOE That has the defect of implying that some credit belongs to others for my work.

WADD You said it. We don't create ex nihilo.

JOE No one has ever helped me. Everything I've done, I've done in spite of family and friends, and teachers, too. They've earned no dividends from me.

WADD How do you put bread on the table? That's a question I think you should be able to answer without

compromising your convictions.

JOE I'm a printer. I work for a job shop. If you need some stationery, brochures, or posters, I'll get you a very good price.

WADD Don't mock me, Vade. I like your novel, but not that much.

JOE Whatever. I won't grovel to get it published.

WADD Groveling won't be required of you. I'll ask you to do me the favor, though, of looking over these suggestions.

WADD hands JOE a sheet of paper, at which he glances.

JOE I don't know what royalties you pay, but triple them and you won't sell me on this rewrite.

WADD You don't mean to tell me your work's perfect?

JOE Far from it. Some small blemishes likely lurk in it for all my efforts, and I'll thank you if you'll call them to my notice. But what you propose here's violence. I won't let you impose your vision on my book.

WADD Vade, in your youth, you have – alas – yet to discern the truth that writing's a collaborative act. You think you work unaided, but the fact is every last word you use to express yourself is common property, and yes, you'd have no readers and nothing to write about without society.

JOE Despite the debt you claim I owe my fellow man, I won't cough up in your coin, if I can help it.

WADD Not even if it means your book won't see the light?

JOE Not even then.

WADD Vade, look. Let's not be hasty here. Tell me, are you married?

JOE Yes.

WADD Children?

JOE One. Another's due soon.

WADD Go home, then. Discuss this with your wife.

JOE There's no point.

WADD Do it anyway. Your life is at a crossroads and, before you take a fateful turn, be sure it's no mistake.

Blackout.

Scene 6

A few hours later. The Cribbers' living room again. LISA is straightening up. Enter DAVID, with a pile of pages he tosses on the table.

DAVID Voila!

LISA What's this? You've finished the revisions so soon?

DAVID That Wadd's a genius. The excisions he recommended worked like magic. I just called and told him, and – get this – the guy's en route. For the manuscript! He lives nearby, so he said he'd be happy to collect it – all the more as he likes to inspect his authors in their element.

LISA If he said that, that means you're now . . . officially . . . one of his authors!

DAVID (*demurely*) I guess.

As they embrace, the doorbell rings.

DAVID He can't be that fast.

LISA No. I'm expecting company.

DAVID You are? You didn't mention that to me when I came home.

LISA I didn't want to worry you, not when you were in so big a hurry to get to work.

DAVID Well, who is it? Explain.

LISA There's no time, and besides, it's too insane. Vade, their name is.

She goes out.

DAVID Insane is right. My brain is reeling. Mort Wadd coming here! It's plain I'm entering the ranks of those who reign over mere mortals.

LISA (*offstage*) Welcome, Joe and Jane. Hi, Zachary! Mark's all agog to show you his room. Jane, it's this way. Meanwhile, Joe, David's in there.

DAVID does a double take as JOE enters.

DAVID Hold on a sec, I know you. I passed you at Wadd's. But how in hell have you turned up here?

JOE Your wife didn't tell you?

DAVID What?

JOE Our paths are running parallel, so she figured it might be just as well for them to intersect.

DAVID You mean you've got a novel coming out with Wadd, too?

JOE Not unless I play ball with him and change what he doesn't like.

Enter JANE and LISA.

DAVID And?

JOE Fuck that.

JANE No! And I'm hoping fate brought us up here just in time for you to make Joe see how great a crime he'll be committing if he lets his pride destroy our future.

DAVID How can I decide that when I haven't read his book?

LISA Please!

DAVID I'd be guilty of presumption if I tried to sway him.

JANE Still –

DAVID Still, I feel qualified to tell your husband he'll look far and wide, in literary matters, for a guide wiser than Wadd. The changes in my book he came up with were so astute they took my breath away.

JANE You made them?

DAVID Every one.

JOE So you agree a novel's a joint undertaking?

JANE That's what Wadd says.

DAVID In a way, yes, he's quite right. Without my MFA advisors, friends, and colleagues, I'd have been lost. They sustained me.

JOE Where's my violin? I'll bet your dedication page has more names than the phone book.

LISA It can't be that you're so egotistical you think your prose has no need of critiques?

JOE I don't suppose anything of the kind – I'm only saying. If I do what Wadd wants, I'll be betraying myself.

JANE I've looked at his suggestions and – try, Joe, though I do – I can't understand your problem with him.

JOE He's a vandal! He defaces. I'd as soon put Zachary, on Wadd's advice, through plastic surgery as re-write my book to his specs. It's mine. I didn't sweat blood over its design so he could come along like Frankenstein and make a monster of it.

The doorbell rings.

DAVID That's Wadd.

LISA I'll let him in.

She exits.

JOE Wadd is coming?

DAVID Yes, and while he's with us, I'll thank you to keep your bile in check.

*As JOE turns disgustedly away,
his eye is caught by a book on the table.*

JOE What's this?

DAVID What?

JOE Don't tell me you read this junk?

DAVID Yes, certainly – don't you? I need to know what people want – what sells – what there's a market

for.

LISA (*offstage*) Won't you come in?

JOE Who cares what people want?

DAVID I do.

JOE And if it's crap they palpitate for?

WADD enters with LISA.

WADD Don't fall in the trap of answering that, Dave. Art for art's sake is a stance not even sophomores and flakes embrace these days.

JOE I was a freshman when I dropped out.

WADD Ah, that would explain it, then. But how do you know Dave?

JOE I don't. We met through our wives, and my guess is they regret their mediation.

WADD (*to JANE*) Judging by your state, you must be Mrs. Vade. When's your due date?

JANE In six weeks.

WADD Well, the baby – lass or lad – will have good reason to admire its dad. He's written a fine book.

JOE If it's so grand, why fuck with it?

JANE Joe, don't –

WADD So it can stand the light. I know you're wary of the hand I offer, but trust me. The shape in which you've left it is too crude.

JOE You mean you itch to slather on the slick finish it lacks from having missed critiquing by the hacks in some grad school.

DAVID That's it – out!

WADD His attacks don't wound me, Dave. I'm not disposed to take offense so easily.

JOE Spare us the fake nobility, Wadd.

WADD Mort.

JOE Merde.

LISA Look, while Mort is our guest, we won't put up

with this sort of rudeness from you.

DAVID Go home. Yes, save your juvenile attitudinizing for the bathroom mirror.

JOE Fine, you kiss his rear. I'll live without the joy of being here to watch.

WADD So, then, you can't see your way clear to do what I advise?

JOE Not now, next year, or ever.

JANE Joe, please –

WADD (*patting JANE'S arm*) I'm so sorry, dear. Your husband could have had a bright career with us.

JOE Careers are for the law-abiding in tweed.

DAVID So stick to jeans. They're great for striding into nonentity.

A child screams offstage.

JANE That's Zack.

JOE hastens off to see what's wrong.

LISA (*to WADD*) The boys are doubtless squabbling over my son's toys. Mark needs to learn to share. Forgive the noise.

DAVID Do you have kids, Mort?

WADD That's a benefit I've yet to be blessed with –

JOE (*Offstage*) You little shit.

Another scream is heard offstage.

LISA That's Mark!

LISA hastens off to see what's wrong.

WADD – unless you count our dog and cat. My wife's so busy with her psychiatric practice she can't spare time for a brat, much though we'd like one.

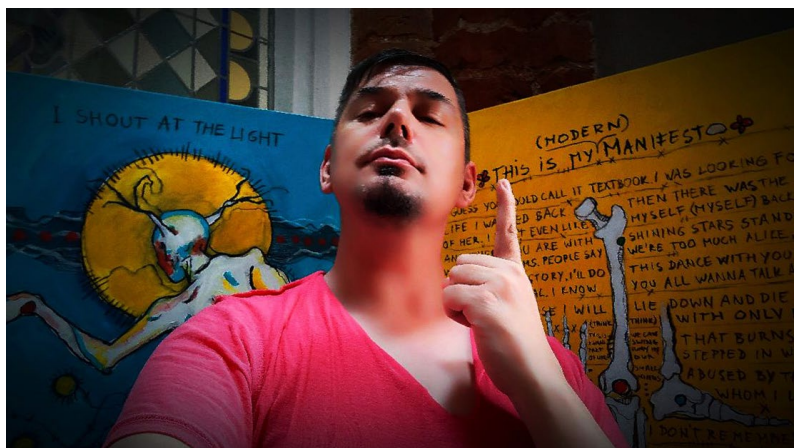
LISA (*offstage, dismayed*) My God.

WADD Eh? What's that?

LISA (*offstage*) You freak! You maniac! What have you done? David, call the police! He bit our son!

Blackout.

ARTIST SPOTLIGHT: TOMISLAV SILIPETAR



In 2014, Tomislav Silipetar graduated from the Academy of Fine Arts in Zagreb in the class of Igor Rončević-Painting Department. In 2015, he became a member of HDLU. In addition to many group exhibitions, he had a number of solo exhibitions in Croatia as well as in other countries. He was the winner of the rector's award for excellence in 2013. His paintings are mostly made with acrylic, and the themes vary from solitude and isolation to the very existence of humanity in a society that condemns.

ARTWORK BY TOMISLAV ŠILIPETAR
PROUD



Acrylic on Canvas

ARTWORK BY TOMISLAV SILIPETAR
THIS LIFE



Acrylic on Canvas

ARTWORK BY TOMISLAV ŠILIPETAR
PILLS



Acrylic on Canvas

POETRY BY MARGARET MARCUM
SOLITAIRE

Flower gem, she winks
in lonely moonlight—who
wins the competition when
there is no competition.

You flipped me over
like a playing card again
and again, but there were only
diamonds—I kept my hearts
hidden in my sleeve.

Cheat a single time,
we have both lost.

FICTION BY GLENN HOWARD
BLOWUP DOLL HUSBAND

I stand in the empty highway when she and her blow-up doll husband run me over in their sedan. She exits the car, unapologetic, and says, *You again*, before strapping me to the roof like I'm dead game. He doesn't say anything, obviously, just sits in the passenger seat and makes the squeaky noise of plastic expanding in the sun.

Anyway, I spit out two chipped teeth and a spurt of blood before finally replying with an ironic *so nice to see both of you again*. The engine turns over and we're off. She cranks the radio, same station as always. Christian rock, yuck. Wispy synths play major chords, making it sound like you're summing a mountain every eight bars. *Can we listen to something else*, I yell.

No, she says calmly, *I'm just taking you to the hospital*, and the music grows louder.

Jesus Christ, kill me now, I cry.

God parts the clouds and looks down on me, his massive forehead right in front of mine.

You sure? He asks.

No. Sorry, Mr. God, I was using exaggerated speech.

I see, He closes the clouds again. Back in the car, she lights a Belmont and her husband summons all the strength in his inflatable body to turn his head to the left and stare disappointedly at her in the rearview mirror.

I don't know why you let him judge you like that, I taunt and grip the antennae tighter as we pick up speed.

I don't let anyone judge me. She pulls the rubber plug from his back and he deflates to a plastic puddle on the car seat. Smoke and bad music billows out the window.

He's so fake. Why can't you see that?

My vision is twenty twenty, she answers.

Bullshit.

Had it checked last week.

So why didn't you see me, I ask, offended.

Who said, she lights another cigarette, I didn't see you?

*

When we arrive at the hospital, my arms, legs, and torso have bled out. The nurse is very cordial while she cuts off my head on top of the car. *A slight pinch*, the nurse says in a nasally voice and slits my throat with her handheld electric saw.

This is hardly helping me, I complain.

I'm busy, she says, and inflates her husband with deep, passionate breaths on the sidewalk. The nurse finally separates my head and places it on a stretcher.

All done!

The nurse takes me inside. I almost say, Thanks for nothing, but then she hoists her husband over her shoulder and we enter the hospital lobby in procession.

I thought you were just dropping me off?

The family's inside.

Inside the sliding glass doors are two more blowup dolls. One wears a blonde wig and holds a sign that reads SO NICE 2 C U. The other has a brown hairpiece, reading glasses, and a gift bag.

Wow, I snort.

Shut up.

As we part in the hallway, I call out, *When I leave here, can I come get my stuff?*

Maybe, her words repeat and reverberate. *We'll see.*

I watch as she places her husband on the floor and embraces her new plastic family. I am put in a silent and empty room with other broken men. I watch through the window as she loads everybody into the sedan and drives away.

POETRY BY JANNA LOPEZ
CERULEAN BLUES

the poet who locked my heart
once leaned behind a street lamp,
his stance lonely resolute
indeed—like paper in wind;
sheets of fibrous pulp
bound by its own derision.

He was a magician, a minstrel,
an unrecognized soul,
a cosmos bled by gentle contradiction.

starry beams bathed in serendipity.

the poet who locked my heart
once clung to third base—
curious beyond first
free enough to shred second
tethered to a snare of unborn grief
home felt far away

though he could almost taste crunch
of chalk and dirt filling his mouth,
sliding, belly burning, face first
towards belonging's victorious base

the poet who locked my heart
was a lost boy—
a child of night's nary kiss
when warm tender lips
were comfort's only salve
cheek air an empty canyon
void of sweet dreams and embrace

I saw him behind the streetlamp.
nothing could hide
his uniquely beautiful shine
through shadow and dusk,
concrete and time,
it was as if
his pale cerulean glow
was painted just for mine

a dusted beam of candied crescent moon

the poet who locked my heart
is stationary in his wandering
he roams in windless trees
among nesting bees and robins
coiled beneath emerald
tendrils of roots and berries
extending toward the sun

I saw through the boy, the mystic,
within the poet—
the magician who made salt from wine
and dreams from dirt
I saw sweet dreams twirl into his eyes
lightning bright, a peppermint sky

my heart knew
they were me.
no where to hide
I was his before time.
“belong to us” they sang
a chorus of joyous bees and robins.

the poet who locked my heart
tightly fastened my breath,
kicked the key down a well

then laughed at his own willful mirth
as we tumbled

he was a seductress, that poet,
his words, his songs,
his well of spell-binding tricks,
a magician, a sorcerer,
a sentry governing
a galaxy of keys
attached to singing
the cerulean blues,
from one locked heart.

FICTION BY FIONA WILKES
BLUE & GOLD

For the first ten minutes of her life, Rapunzel existed only as a blur of blues and golds.

The nuns said she was born too soon, too quick, but I know she was ready. She wouldn't have come if she wasn't ready. When she finally squawked her first breath and the nuns breathed simultaneous sighs of relief and annoyance, she was bundled into a bobbled yellow blanket and deposited into my arms so that the nuns could wash their hands. She was still tinged blue around the edges, her rosebud mouth stretched into an inquisitive "o", her hair a shock of gold. It was as if she wore a crown or a halo.

When their hands were clean, the nuns stole her from me for more checks and never truly gave her back.

"Have you thought of a name?" Sister Theresa asked me later. I don't know why they let the mothers choose. The names were never kept after they were sent away.

I looked at the baby asleep in the cot at the end of the bed. "Rapunzel."

"What kind of name is that?" Scoffed Sister Carol from the other side of the room.

"It's a flower, a purple flower. I read it in a book once."

"That's not a proper name for a child." She told me firmly. "If you want to name her after a flower, try Rose, or Violet if it has to be purple."

So they wrote her name down as Violet, but she was always Rapunzel to me.

Rapunzel was far more beautiful than her father. Far more gentle too, though nowhere near as quiet.

He stole my life. She gave it back.

Hand over my mouth, the other under my dress, he ripped me apart for his own satisfaction and then accused me of trapping him when I cradled my stomach. He told Father Michael that someone had got me in trouble – of course he didn't know who it was – could have been anyone the way I dressed. Father Michael told my parents I was a disgrace to them, a disgrace to the community and, most importantly, a disgrace to God.

When the pains came, they did not call for the doctor. They did not take me to the hospital. They marched me down to Sister Gothel's Mother and Baby Home and locked the gate behind me.

They stole my child.

They ripped her from my body and then from my life, a screaming mess of blues and golds. Then they stole my youth.

I worked off our debt for a year. When they finally let me out, I found work as a cleaner down the street so that every afternoon I could come back and ask for Rapunzel. I would call up to the nursery, hoping to spot a glimmer of gold, a flash of blue in the window. I wondered how long her hair was now. I had told the nuns not to cut it but why would they listen to me? They had not listened when I begged for

pain relief or when I begged to go home or when I begged for my daughter. Maybe her hair was past her shoulders now. In my mind, I watched it grow, spiralling down her slender back, rippling over the bumps in her fragile spine, pooling at her feet in curls of marigold, lemon, amber.

She could push open the window if she tried hard enough. Maybe the other children would help her. She could throw her hair down to the ground and I could climb up to visit her. I could bring her gifts and sweets and hugs.

~

I got in trouble again.

He was a nice boy. He worked at the baker's and he always saved me a smile and an iced bun. I told him tales about Rapunzel's adventures, although I never told him that she was anything more than a fairy story. We came together every night for three weeks, both clambering for comfort. One night he told me he had joined the army, that he was going to fight in a war, but that he would save up all his pay and when the war was over, he would send for me. Two months after he left, I felt his son stirring in my guts.

I hid Peter for nearly seven months before my employer walked in on me changing and saw his shape inside of my body, Rapunzel's silver markings forming a target around him. I was sent back to Sister Gothel's.

This time, I had a bigger debt to pay. I was told that when the baby was born, he would stay at Sister Gothel's and I would be sent to the laundry to pay off our debts. At least, I thought, he will be with his sister. I dreamt of them lying beneath the apple trees, in the orchard backing onto the Home, entwined together, her flaxen hair creating a blanket for her

brother. They would be warm under there, I thought, even in the darkest moments of winter.

It was not to be. Peter went under the trees alone.

Years later, when someone peered over the wall for the first time in decades and decided to dig up the orchard, they found him there. Ice cold and scattered, frozen petals littered beneath the rotting apple cores. It took them a while to work out that it was him; there were too many others lying beside him.

The nuns called me out of the laundry and, uncharacteristically, made me a cup of strong tea in Sister Carol's office. "Peter is gone." They said after I had taken the first scorching sip.

"Gone where?" I asked, resting the cup back in its saucer.

Sister Theresa patted my hand. She was always kinder than the others. "He's gone to live with the angels, pet."

Where was that? Why couldn't I go, too?

I took another gulp of tea, letting it scald my throat. "Why?"

"He failed to thrive," said Sister Carol, while Sister Theresa kept patting my hand. "Happens more than you might think, even in this day and age."

"Where is Rapunzel?" They exchanged looks. I knew they thought I should have wailed for Peter, begged for my baby. But there was no point. He wasn't coming back. Besides, I didn't want to give them the satisfaction. "Where is

she?" I repeated.

"She has been fostered out."

"Fostered out where?"

"We can't tell you that. You know that."

~

They never did tell me, but I found out. I broke into the records room when everyone else was at Mass. I was given the day off. I claimed cramps and they thought I was probably too distressed with the death of Peter to be pushed too much on that day. So I committed my next sin under their roof.

The following Saturday, my afternoon away from the laundry, I went to her new home. It was a tall house, with a barbed-wire gate so high she may as well have been locked in a tower. From her file, I had learned a great many things. She was five years old now, her hair still blonde, her eyes still blue. Small for her age, but still thriving. Her new parents were Mr. and Mrs. King. They had renamed her and called her Barbara, which I thought to be a crime in itself. Her new father, the only one she'd ever known, wanted her kept away from the other children, especially the boys. She was too pretty for her own good, and until she was old enough to be married, she was to be kept hidden.

I peered through the gates, up at the room at the very top of the house, desperate for a glimpse of her. But I did not see her. I made a plan, and the following Saturday, I returned to the tower.

They stole my child. So I stole her back.

~

The newspapers nicknamed me Mother Gothel, after the place where Rapunzel had been born and I was reborn. They chased us with a hunger that scared me for a few months, but they steadily lost their appetites when we didn't reappear. For fifteen years they half-heartedly searched, Rapunzel's blue eyes and gold hair staring up at them from newspaper front pages, flickering on black-and-white TVs. Then they forgot her. They always forget after a little while.

Sometimes Rapunzel asks me where we came from, why she can remember a big house with a pink teddy bear and three older girls. Why does she smell talcum powder and laundry detergent and shortbread biscuits when she falls asleep? I just smile and brush her hair.

“That’s nothing more than a fairy story.”

POETRY BY REBECCA THRUSH

10,000 POINTS

When you see a crash
in the movies
The person hit is always *graceful*
In their careening arc of
momentary fear
The camera slows, the audience
holds a collective breath
Their fragile but unbreakable body
curls knowingly into a ball
Like skee-ing in the arcade
and banking on a corner shot

When you're the ball,
 there is no slow-mo
 The sudden crowd has
 no time to wait and see
 Because the
 boom—fly—crack
 is gone too soon
 That sudden flash
 of a car about to come
 Blink
 That flight you thought
 you'd never achieve
 Is singing out
 the notes of failure

 Before you even get to see your score

FICTION BY MATT GULLEY
THE HABERDASHER'S LAMENT

Clarabelle and Anne Marie both carried lanterns into the cold and empty room. This was a place for quiet and sordid conversation.

"I've found out something . . . disturbing. Master Franklin plans to go out at next Saturday's jubilee . . . without a hat," said Clarabelle in a hushed tone.

"Without a hat?"

"With nary a structured felt upon his head."

"If he is serious, that would prove quite a fright."

"I believe he is quite serious."

"Well, if he is serious, then, well, a certain frightfulness may occur." The lanterns swung in small motions that sent crescent moons of light jangling about the egg-blue walls and red curtains. It was snowing outside, and dark. Little hunched blurs walked with hard, forward leans against the wind and piercing flakes. "How did you come across such information?"

"It is said, in our age, that gossip is the true currency."

"And what of money?"

"Yes, the other true currency, which is sometimes a truer currency than mere gossip."

"Yes."

"Well, I was in my bedroom, reading a brownish-grey book by candlelight."

"Was it dusty?"

"Increasingly dusty, and unremarkable. I was pausing at the end of a page, as I often do, to sigh and contemplate my station, when I heard a stirring."

"A stirring?"

"Yes, often a keen ear is the true sense of sight in these cavernous estates."

“And what of sight?”

“Yes, sight is primarily known as the sense of having seen things, but a keen ear is often a powerful ally.”

“This lantern is hot.”

“They are terribly hot. So, putting down my book, I went silently into the hall. I saw a portly figure at the end of the hallway. At first I thought it was Edwards, the valet, but upon closer inspection, it was Master Franklin himself!”

“Master Franklin himself? Why,” and then they said in unison:

“Master Franklin is seldom seen in the servants’ quarters!”

“Astonishing,” said Anne Marie. “And what was he doing?”

“I saw, in no short order, Master Franklin throwing no less than seven or eight top hats on the ground and stomping them flat with his boot.”

“Clarabelle,” said Anne Marie. “What you’ve seen is positively scandalous.”

“He was puffing on his pipe in a fiendish way, muttering that he is no friend of hats and that hats are no friend of his.”

“Did he see you?”

“He may have. I was quite still, but after he had stomped his last hat perfectly flat, like a postage stamp or a flattened marshmallow, he turned in my direction and seemed to want to exclaim something, out to the dark towards me. But then he paused and turned, and he was gone.”

“And what became of the hats?”

“They are in my possession. I know not whether to secretly reveal them to Miss Alice or to use them to stabilize the one leg of the table in my room that’s a bit shorter than the other.”

“Yes, to cure that troublesome wobble.”

“Oh, Anne Marie, these machinations of man and God are sometimes too much to handle.”

“Come, Clarabelle, we shall retire to our humble quarters and get absolutely blotto on some Opium. My cousin has just brought some from the Orient.”

“Yes, Anne Marie, let us go and do that. In the morning, the answers may become more clear.”

The two left the room they had found suitable for their clandestine words and crept down the stairs like silent sisters trying not to wake their parents. The morning, however, would never come. The Opium was not pure, tainted as it was by being majorly composed of chalk and strychnine. Clarabelle and Anne Marie never woke up, succumbing in each others’ arms atop the sheets of their servant bed.

Master Franklin did attend the jubilee without a hat, and ushered in an era of hatlessness that we still experience to this day.

ARTWORK BY SAM ALEKS
SHINE ON YOU CRAZY DIAMOND



*20 in x 20 in
Mixed Media on Cotton Duck Canvas*

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOHN MORABITO
UNTITLED - ALLSTON-BRIGHTON, MA 2008



Canon Powershot point-and-shoot

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOHN MORABITO
UNTITLED - ALLSTON-BRIGHTON, MA 2008



Canon Powershot point-and-shoot

PHOTOGRAPHY BY PAWEŁ GRAJNERT
4 CARS ON HAWAII



*Camera: Panasonic DMC-LX5
Lens: Leica 3.8x F2.0 ultra-wide-angle 24mm
Hawai'i, 2021.*

THE CAFÉ

I put my bag at the café table.

“What d’you want?”

Ana sits down. “Ummmm...”

I glance at the counter.

“Where’s the barista?” I ask, looking around the café and across the mall for any sign of staff.

A middle-aged man with no drink at the next table looks up from his newspaper. “She went to get her COVID shot. She’ll be back soon.”

“Wow. Shouldn’t she get the day off for that?”

The man shrugs and turns back to his newspaper.

“Qué va!” whispers Ana, “Poor girl! Probably can’t afford the day off!”

“It’s sad.” I nod.

Ana looks at the man with the newspaper. “He must be a regular,” she says in Spanish.

“Yup. It’s nice to find a community place like this, even if they do stint their employees.” I reply, still in Spanish. “I hate the big chains.”

We start working: I check my email, Ana pulls out her laptop. It’s a privilege of “working from home” that one need not “work from home.”

After twenty minutes or so, the man with the newspaper leaves. Soon, a couple replaces him. The woman opens her MacBook. The man reaches for his wallet, steps toward the bar, and pauses.

“Where’s the barista?” he asks.

“She went to get her COVID shot,” I say.

“Wow. Shouldn’t she get the day off for that?”

I shrug and turn back to my work.

FICTION BY JAMES CALLAN

SUPERSTITION HAS THE LAST LAUGH

I've never been a superstitious person. I've never held a strong belief in anything beyond what is scientific, what has been proven, what is indisputably real, concrete, or that which is shown plain before my very eyes. I'm not a close-minded person. I don't fully reject the unknown, the mythical, the biblical. I don't keep all that is mysterious at arm's length. But magic, that's out the window. Miracles? If I see it, I'll believe it. Love at first sight? Well, that's probably the most real magic there is in this world. Or maybe biology as a whole. Life, now that's pretty miraculous. Scientific, too.

But when someone asks me for my star sign, then goes on to profess each detail of my character, explaining to me who I am, like who people are is as simple as just walking up to the Sorting Hat at Hogwarts, that really gets my fucking goat. And not just because I'm a Capricorn. Honestly, I'd sooner believe that Harry Potter stuff before this stars-in-the-sky bullshit.

When someone stoops to looking for wisdom in tarot readings, seeks answers in the night sky, nodding sagely while filling me in on my past, my future, then goes on to inform me of my innate, dormant abilities near to breaking the surface but buried by such and such, when someone learns that I am a Capricorn and goes on to dissect my soul, down to the minute nuance of my individual spirit, well, in such encounters I am inclined to roll my eyes, tell whatever mystic to kindly fuck off.

Physics. I'll not argue with that. Gravity, for instance, has never failed to let me down. No matter how many times I jump up to reach the stars, graze the constellation Capricornus with outstretched fingers, I come crashing back down on my two feet. Physics grounds me. Makes me down-to-earth.

No, I've never believed in anything remotely like those varied transcendental ideologies or other-worldly notions, the certain kind my dad dubbed "mumbo jumbo," my physics professor "trite hippie bullshit." But there was something about the way that fortune teller told me how I was destined to die. The crack in her voice that came from raw emotion, the trembling of her pierced lip, how the silver ring caught the candlelight, the tear in her eye, how it rolled down her cheek to land upon the ten of wands. Then, how she refused to charge me for my reading, after she told me I was sure to die, trampled in a stampede. There was something to it. Something that strayed from mere subterfuge. Something that transcended convincing theatrics, a well-acted performance. So what? Was I now a believer?

In 1990, I graduated from college with a bachelor's in physics. To celebrate, I traveled in Europe for half of the summer with my two friends, Daniel and Todd. In Pamplona, I wandered the Mercado de Santo Domingo on a hot, dry Spanish afternoon where I unexpectedly became distracted from my aimless meandering at an impressive cheese stall. While the selection of cheese was humbling compared to the Kraft Singles and powdered Parmesan routinely found in my own fridge back home, it was not the variety or quality of cheese which struck me. It was not the cheese at all.

In the back corner of the stall, behind some monstrous wheel of Pecorino, a small television glowed with the black and white telecast of a news broadcast. My Spanish was weak, but I picked up the gist of what was being reported, and later read about, in detail, the horrific tragedy that had played out earlier that week in Saudi Arabia.

During the Hajj, well over a thousand people died among the traveling masses taking part in the annual Islamic pilgrimage to the holy city, Mecca. In a bottleneck effect, the great throng was funneled into a tunnel passage where many suffocated and were trampled upon. Panic likely played a part in what amounted to fourteen hundred deaths. Panic, just like

what I felt while reading about that awful incident. Panic, surging through me as I recalled that surreal, but ultimately too real encounter with that fortune teller at the county fair. I pondered the dismal end that had been prescribed to me and binge-ate a giant wheel of Pecorino for comfort.

Daniel and Todd could not believe I was not going to take part in the Running of the Bulls, the reason we had come to Pamplona. Sorry, I told them. Explained that I'd had a change of heart. They pooh-poohed me and called me "chicken," made chicken noises and did their best to affect the proper gesticulations of poultry. I didn't mind. Running away from charging, ornery bulls in narrow city streets seemed like a fine way to fulfill the prophecy of my wretched demise.

While my friends ran like idiots and risked their well-being, I drank sangria in a charming cantina overlooking a sixteenth century stronghold. While Daniel and Todd adamantly profess that I missed out on the time of my life, I wonder if I missed out on the time of my death. Either way, that sangria was rather delicious.

In 1991, I traveled with Daniel to South Africa. Our ultimate destination was Tanzania, to go on a safari at Serengeti National Park. But before we set out to experience the untamed wilds of the savanna, we decided to first spend some time in Cape Town before flying out of Johannesburg. En route to Joburg, the City of Gold, we stopped in a forgettable city called Kroonstad to stretch our legs and find a bite to eat.

We found some dingy sports pub where I decided to forgo the hamburger that I really wanted because on the menu it made a big show about being American. The little paper American flag on a toothpick that pierced the bun and juicy patty put me off. I would be way too embarrassed to order that thing, to hold it out in front of me while taking tentative bites, talking with my American accent with my American hamburger and little American flag pushed to the side of my plate. I opted for the chicken wings, and I wish I had just swallowed my pride rather than those sauce-laden

scraps of flesh 'cause I doubt that American burger would have given me the diarrhea that had us stopping twice more before reaching Johannesburg.

As we ate, I noticed that even while we were in a sports pub, there was nothing but news broadcasts playing on all four televisions. Daniel and I tuned in and listened to reports of a soccer match in some town called Orkney, which turns out was only about an hour or so away from where we were. Turns out there was a bad accident. A brawl broke out at a stadium that was filled well beyond its max capacity. Dozens of people died in the frenzied panic that ensued when riot-control fences had been put in place, packing human beings together as if they had been sardines.

Daniel made the very bad joke of asking who won the match. His jovial tone and complete disregard for the local tragedy was not well-received. We were asked to leave before we finished our meals, and I was relieved when the angry eyes that followed us out the door pursued us no further. The last thing I needed was a bunch of pissed-off South Africans showing me just how tough they really are, and right when that diarrhea was kicking in.

In the car, driving north, we listened to the radio reporting the details of the tragedy in Orkney. Forty people trampled, crushed to death.

I never made it to Tanzania. Daniel was furious. More so when I explained why I couldn't go on with our adventure, why I had to leave for home immediately. I told him that I couldn't risk being trampled. That I didn't dare place myself before a wildebeest herd, an angry water buffalo. Not going to happen, I declared. Well, he didn't call me a chicken this time. He called me crazy, a pussy, and a fucking idiot. I did feel a pang of regret while flying home, missing out on the wonders of the savanna, the wild Serengeti. I felt no regret whatsoever, however, in losing Daniel as my friend. Honestly, I'll miss my next shit more than that guy's lousy company.

Less than a month later, three people died at an AC/

DC concert in Salt Lake City. A crowd of 13,000 gushed forward towards the stage as the rock band played “Thunderstruck,” killing two teenage boys and a young woman. I wasn’t at that concert. I’ve never been to Salt Lake City. But I did attend AC/DC’s Minneapolis concert earlier on during that same “Razor’s Edge” tour. It was only 3 people, but I was beginning to feel as if trampling incidents were gravitating towards me, slowly but surely. But then I forced myself to laugh the notion off. Gravity doesn’t work that way.

In 1994, there was yet another incident during the Hajj in Mecca. Two hundred and seventy people were trampled. Two weeks later, Disney’s *The Lion King* was released in theaters. Even at my age, I had thoroughly enjoyed its list of predecessors: *Beauty and the Beast*, *Aladdin*, and *The Little Mermaid*. To this day, I consider those four films Disney’s greatest simultaneous streak of winning productions. I hastily purchased a ticket within a few days of the film’s release and went with Todd and his girlfriend.

I was gripped from the opening scene. The powerful music and the jaw-dropping majesty of the African wilds had me feeling rectified for missing out on Tanzania three years before. Regrettably, I walked out of the film prematurely. At the part where Scar tricks Simba into entering the dried-out ravine, meanwhile sneakily orchestrating murderous treachery by directing his hyena lackeys to harass a great herd of wildebeest into a state of panic, funneling their vast multitude down into the ravine, I griped the cheap plastic arms of my chair and my stomach turned to knots.

I thought of the people caught in that tunnel during the Hajj in Mecca. I thought of crowded soccer arenas and riot walls. I thought of AC/DC and how “Thunderstruck” would probably cheapen the stampede scene in *The Lion King* if it had been chosen for its soundtrack. When Scar told Mufasa, the king, that his son was down in the ravine, that there was a wildebeest stampede, the stately monarch and loving father wasted little time to trade his life for his son’s. When

Mufasa entered the ravine and a wildebeest crashed into him, and determined, he got up, struggling ever onward to save his son, the vulnerable Simba, I just couldn't. I couldn't watch. I was sure I'd be sick. So I got up. And left.

I met up with Todd and his girlfriend after the movie ended. I had driven us to the mall and I couldn't just leave them, so I stuck around, eating movie popcorn in the front seat of my car and listening to AC/DC. When the two of them came out of the cinema and over to the car they went on to tell me how I left at the best part, how the death of Mufasa was so moving, how the entire film was beautiful, incredible, that I missed out. They had assumed I left to save myself from the emotional turmoil of Mufasa's brave sacrifice. They thought I left to cry in private, embarrassed and ashamed. It was easier to let them think that than correct them, tell them that actually it is because I am ordained to die in a stampede and all those thundering wildebeest hooves put me on edge. "Thunderstruck" was playing on the car radio. I punched the off button and solemnly drove the two of them home.

In 1995, I rented *The Lion King* from Blockbuster Video and watched it at home. The VHS tape had not been rewound by its previous user, but other than that, the entire home movie experience was outstanding. Boy, Todd and his girlfriend weren't kidding. The whole Mufasa thing, the ravine, the betrayal of Scar, Simba's banishment and false sense of guilt; this was the moment in the film that made what was already a terrific movie into an absolute animated masterpiece. I was so gripped by the beauty of it, the moving nature of its visual narrative, that I hardly noticed my lack of anxiety for my own well-being during the stampede scene. I felt like I broke boundaries after watching *The Lion King*. I felt like I was ready to break some more.

Later in 1995, I returned to Pamplona, this time with my girlfriend, Jennifer. I hadn't told her about the tarot reading that left me with a strange phobia for potential death-inflicting stampedes. I didn't feel the need to. After all, I was

making leaps and bounds with my fearful superstitions, more or less rid of them by the time I had met her. *Let sleeping dogs lie*, I thought. *'Cause this dog is like that three-headed one in Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone. And really, I've had enough of all this magic shit.*

To hell with prophecies. There is no room for them in my life. No room for them in my death. A pitcher of sangria had me as brave as I was ever going to get, so me and Jennifer joined the boisterous Pamplona crowd. We ran in the Running of the Bulls.

There was a moment when some froth-muzzled black bull, eyes wide and raging upward toward the skies, nearly clipped me as it ran past. I was so glad to see its ass, its tail swishing in front of me, which assured me that a near misgiving had been narrowly avoided. I felt a little trickle of piss down my leg, but the relief was greater than my embarrassment and I continued to run, occasionally looking over my shoulder to determine that Jennifer was all right, that no more bulls were right on my ass.

More often than the bulls, it was the people that nearly trampled me. Someone's foot caught the back heel of my shoe, gave me a flat tire that had me running in one Nike, one sock. But the sangria was doing its thing, and at some point I was laughing just as much as screaming, locking hands with Jennifer as we ran like two children at play. In the end, I felt exhilarated. The two of us felt more alive, more in love, than ever before.

When the running came to a close and evening started to settle in, we washed away our sweat by wading in some fancy, public fountain and kissed. At the hotel, we drank pitchers of sangria until our heads began to swim, filled our bellies with obscene portions of Pecorino, and had the best sex of our lives on a mosaic-tiled terrace overlooking a sixteenth century stronghold. Afterwards, catching our breaths, we sat and relaxed under a dazzling night sky. I noted Capricornus staring down on me. I didn't point it out to Jennifer. "Look,"

I said instead. “The Big Dipper.”

Just before 1996, Jennifer called me up around Christmas to tell me she had found someone else. That it’s her, not me. That she still wanted to be friends. She hoped I’d have a merry Christmas, a happy new year. I told her I hope she dies in a stampede, and I hung up.

In 1996, I spent a lot of time looking for a job. My bachelor’s in physics wasn’t really paving the way to a lucrative career. On occasion, I’d eye the local Target store and consider, *should I?* But I really didn’t want to work retail. I really didn’t want to work at Target.

In October of ‘96, an avalanche of human beings at a FIFA World Cup qualification match in Guatemala ended with eighty three dead, and well over a hundred others injured. The sale of counterfeit tickets created an influx of attendees that the soccer stadium was unable to withstand. I thought of Daniel and his stupid fucking callous joke with his stupid fucking smirking face. I heard him in my mind ask the pointless question, who won the match? Guatemala or Costa Rica? In my mind I murdered Daniel. I cut him into pieces. I buried half of him in Guatemala and the other half in Costa Rica. Guess I’d call that a draw.

Around the same time people were dying at soccer matches in Guatemala, a highly coveted product became all the rage in the United States. It was sought after with zealous dedication, religious fervency, rabid ferocity. It had become the Holy Grail to all moms and dads across the nation. It was on every kid’s Christmas list and Santa would be really fucking busy this year trying to make all the little ones happy. It was a fad that lit America afire with a strange and seductive draw. It was bright and red and caught everyone’s attention. Boy, did it ever. It was a little plush toy that laughed like a demonic midget when you tickled it. It was everything that year. It was Tickle Me Elmo.

Late into 1996, I bit the bitter bullet and filled in my application to work at the local Target. I got the job, as I

knew I would, and earned jack shit an hour doing mindless things. Putting coats and shirts on hangers, greeting people at the door with a fake smile, opening locked cases that held the good stuff, the stuff Target really didn't want you to steal, the cameras or video games, or for the girl workers, the jewelry, though I think that sexist arrangement was for the comfort of shoppers more than anything else, how the bras and panties strategically segued to the real expensive baubles. Though at Target a lot of those were dirt-fucking-cheap.

On Friday, November 22, 1996, I worked the opening shift at Target. I waded past a queue of antsy, crazy-eyed people at the door. The line of shoppers made a tally of humanity across the huge, snow-covered parking lot. Everyone was shivering, or maybe trembling with excitement. Everyone was here for it. The Black Friday sales. But really, let's face it, everyone was here for it, for him. Tickle Me fucking Elmo.

I said my many pardon me's, my excuse me pleases. I wiggled my way through a starving crowd, all of them intensely hungry for a red plush doll that laughed like it was on the best, newest drug on the market. I unlocked then hastily re-locked the door behind me. I turned on the lights. And I looked at the vast expanse of a mass-market retail kingdom. The kingdom of Hell.

As I begin the opening duties, halfheartedly acknowledging my coworkers as they steadily came in to bear the storm that was Black Friday in Target, I bitterly wondered why in the hell I ever bothered to get a bachelor's in physics. I closed my eyes, crossed my fingers, and hoped that physics would abandon its rigid laws, drop the whole gravity thing, and just allow me to float away from this place, this situation, this goddamned job that I feel maliciously bound to.

The time came to open the doors. As planned, we would open fifteen minutes early. This was to maximize sales, which were slated to break records for our local branch. I was given the honor. Lucky fucking me. I was given the privilege to open the doors, announce to the eager masses, elate them

with good tidings, that we were now open, fifteen minutes ahead of schedule.

When I put in the key, faces on the other side pressed against the glass. I felt the pressure on the door, the forceful lean inward. Suddenly Target was feeling like a medieval fortress, a sixteenth century Spanish fort. Suddenly I felt as if the Target was under siege. Shoppers with wallets at the ready became warriors with a battering ram hard at work. I shook away my daydreams. I turned the key.

Welcome to Tar-

I never did get those words out. The doors collapsed inward. They weren't meant to do that. Always before, they open outwards. Push, the door read from my side. But those frenzied shoppers pushed a whole lot harder. And then I was under those doors. I was under dozens, hundreds, who knows how many fast moving feet, the whole weight of bodies rushing by. A high-heeled shoe dug into my thigh. I screamed, or tried to, but couldn't manage. I couldn't breathe. No one seemed to notice me. They were locked in, under a spell of Black Friday magic.

The holiday music was playing Christmas tunes. I don't know how I heard it above the din of a thousand thumping footsteps, the crushing of my ribs, but I heard it, "Jingle Bell Rock." Then my world went a little hazy. Scratch that, a whole lot of major fucking hazy.

I think in the end someone noticed. Someone bent down and though I didn't hear them, I'll wager they said something like *are you okay?* Or maybe they shouted something like *call an ambulance!* But I knew by the way things were going I'd be better off at some soccer match in Guatemala or Orkney, South Africa than be here at the local Target. I'd sooner be at Mecca, attending the masses during the Hajj. I'd rather be looking over my shoulder at some raging bull in Pamplona. But here I was, at the job I hated more than Daniel, that wretched bastard. Putting things as frank as they can possibly be, I'd prefer to lay down on the dry, tall grass of the

savanna in the Serengeti and allow some devious, mischief-making hyenas to harass a herd of wildebeest in my general direction.

But I didn't get my wish. No, sir. Not like the handful of lucky, bratty kids who will be opening a present this Christmas and counting their lucky stars, Capricornus and all, rejoicing that Santa pulled through, got them a stupid fucking obnoxious Tickle Me Elmo. No, I had no such luck.

Trying to stay alive was just too much. Way too painful. So I let go. I accepted the inevitable. The ordained. The foreseen. "Jingle Bell Rock" went quiet. Those bright lights above me went dim. In my head I heard AC/DC's "Thunderstruck," a soundtrack that cheapened my death.

The last thing I saw, or envisioned, before all went black, was the candlelight sheen on the fortune teller's silver lip-ring and the image on the card of the ten of wands. Then all went black. All faded to nothing. "Thunderstruck" dwindled to soundless quiet. Then, filling the space to the mute tranquility of death, that perfect nothing, an unhinged giggle-fit of high pitched, maniacal, fevered laughter. Over and over and over again.

POETRY BY KIM ABI ZEID DAOU
AMYGDALA EPHEMERA

The Amygdala is
Memory's
Proxy.
Little threads,
Taking us back to where we belong.

Explicit memory
Is kept safe in the
Hippocampus.
Amygdala
Is effectively woven
With memory.

One is the perfect picture,
The other is blurry.
One is an episode,
An event,
Autobiography.
The other is encoded
Sensations
Smells
Sounds
Tastes
Emotions.

Fragments of events.

One is a day spent at the beach.
The other
Is a stomach
Full of summer and dream.

The sand between my toes.
Seashell resonance.
Perfumed with voices.
Their vibration
Their intonation.
One voice can be a waterfall.

One is after-school activities.
The other is
The salty mist of curtains backstage.
The echoes of voices ballooning
Into prayer
A choir.
Thyme and olive oil.

One is eating pears by the sea.
The other
Is nectar and sea breeze,
Salty sugar-coated lips.

One is spending the day with mom and dad.
The other
Is all love
There is.
A heart swelling with love,
A voice dipped in chocolate.

One is springtime and May.
My sister and I
Playing on the swings.
The other
Is lip gloss
Strawberry and nectar
Girls growing tall
As spring blooms.

One is experience.
The other its dimensions. One is the story,
The other its essence.
One is the memory,
The other its presence.

One is the story,
The other its archivist.

Even time likes to be remembered.

POETRY BY EMILY ANDRES
THE MILLENNIAL'S WHITE LIGHTER

its tuesday when my lucky white lighter drops from my
pocket hole
but some lint remains
some will always remain
in the cheese-grater of life you will fall apart
but i'll remain
there's blood on this puddle
no use for a wet death-lighter
guess I'll turn 28 now
thanks
honestly
i have no idea how I've survived



ARTIST SPOTLIGHT

THE
NICOLA
BRAYAN
COLLECTION

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Nicola Brayan is a young aspiring artist from Sydney, Australia. She has rediscovered her passion for art during the pandemic, and uses vivid colours and contrast to capture emotions and expression. Her work is a love letter to what it means to be human. More of her work can be found on Instagram at the handle

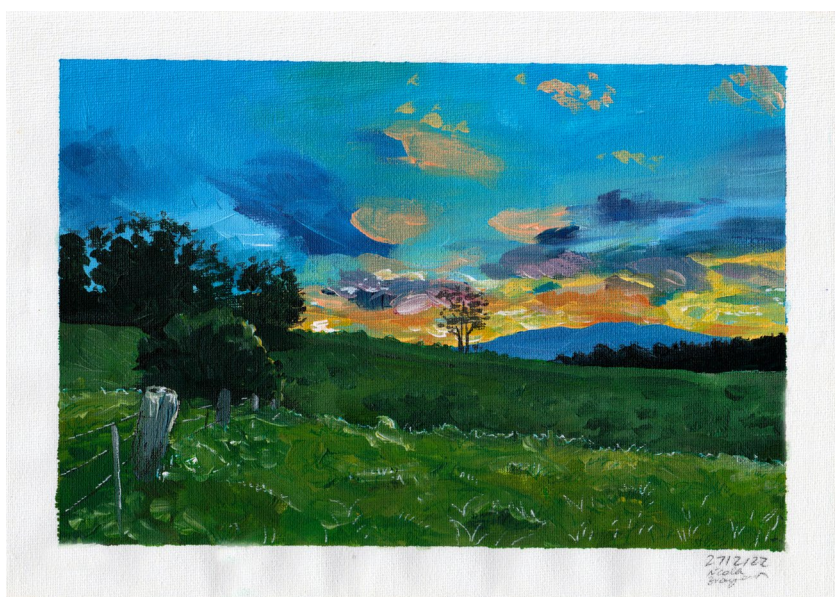
@an.aesthetic.mirror

ARTWORK BY NICOLA BRAYAN
SAM II



Charcoal on paper

ARTWORK BY NICOLA BRAYAN
QUORROBOLONG



Acrylic on canvas

Nicola Brayan

101

ARTWORK BY NICOLA BRAYAN
SACCHARINE



Ballpoint pen and highlighter on paper

POETRY BY BÉIBHINN SULLIVAN DUBH
**THEY TOOK MY ARMS BECAUSE
I WOULD NOT GO QUIETLY**

Because I am woman.

Because I am black hair and blonde,
skin darker than my father's heart,
paler than the arctic wolf.

Because I am not my mother.

Because I am slim, yet more voluptuous
than Lucian's Benefits Supervisor.

Because I am woman.

Because how could any woman
love a man whose touch is as cold
as the metal he beats daily
into submission?

The mad man built me with
drawers — open here, here,
and here —
pull out another lie and another
and another and another and another —
tell me more about who I am

Who am I?

Who am I?

I am not my mother.

Because sometimes my chin tilts up

and sometimes down and this
has nothing to do with sex.

Because I am woman.

Because sometimes I get weary.

Because sometimes I like to
inhale the immense brilliance
of my own possibility.

Because no brute will pin me
down, fill me with monsters,
cage me between the mirrored bars
of heaven and hell and call it
life.

Because I am not my mother.

Because no man is my equal.
No man is my god.

Because I spit their *salach* lies
from me — their witch, cheat,
whore, hag, bitch, slut, slag —

because I am woman.

Because why should I allow any man
to crush my phenomenal female divinity.

because they are afraid?

I am not my mother.

*

Watch the water's silken palms
caress without threat
the fine hard ripples of my flesh.

Watch me allowing
myself to be
held.

1. This poem was inspired by 3 sculptures of Venus, the Roman God of beauty and sexual desire: (i) the Venus de Milo, a 6-foot 8-inch armless ancient Greek statue of Venus discovered in a cave on the Greek island of Milos in 1820; (ii) a half-size reproduction of that statue made in 1936 by Surrealist artist Salvador Dali, called Venus de Milo with Drawers; (iii) a 35,000-year-old voluptuous ivory statuette of the Goddess found in Germany in 2008.
2. In ancient Greek mythology Venus was unhappily married to Vulcan, God of metalworking.
3. Benefits Supervisor Sleeping is an oil on canvas painting by Lucian Freud, portraying a full-figured naked woman reclining on a couch.
4. *Salach* is the Irish word for dirty.

FICTION BY DANIEL DEISINGER

THE FACES BEHIND THE MASK OF KURR

General Tarrus split the Gate of Faces and entered the city of Kurr, riding up the main avenue as his army cheered him; they lifted bloody swords, their dented shields bore the emblem of the Empire of Many Peaks – mountains like gnashing, pointed teeth. The Kurrs who had stayed to the last lay dead in the gutter alongside his armored charger, or on their knees, hands bound and boots pressing the backs of their heads.

Through the wounded city the victorious parade sliced, until it filled the widest plaza to bursting. Smoke rose to fill heaven and brought a smile to Tarrus's face as he imagined the entire city burning red. But not yet. Not until he tore the mask from the face of Kurr.

He leaped from his white steed, passing his spear to an aide. His long sword hung at his belt, and his heavy black gore-stained armor turned each footfall into a crash on the uneven stones under him.

Smoke obscured the cliff stabbing into the sky above the city's south side. Through shifting haze, countless carved faces in the cliff's right side blazed red under the low, western sun. The faces on the left hid in premature night.

The plaza roared. Soldiers victorious or defeated, citizens dead or alive, and leaders wise or foolish filled it. The empire cheered General Tarrus, and when he reached those former leaders of Kurr, his wide smile crushed them further.

They stood before him, robes and fine shirts torn, hair disheveled, blood running down their faces. Red sun filled Tarrus's right eye as he drew his sword. "This place is mine," he said. "It is General Tarrus's, and the Empire of the Many Peaks. Where Lord Samael failed a century ago, I succeed. Your city and its holdings are no longer yours. Only the dead do not believe."

The leaders said nothing. “Wise mouths stay shut,” Tarrus said. His body tensed before them. “Take me to the Mask.”

The leaders, before Tarrus’s eyes, straightened their backs, squared their shoulders, lifted their chins. Scowls replaced fear; clenched fists grew from limp wrists.

The evening light slid across his sword. The red blade shivered as he stepped forward. He gestured at an elderly woman among the leaders, and soldiers dragged her toward the general, then forced her to kneel. “Take me to the Mask!”

The woman lifted her head to gaze at him. Her eyebrows came together, and her lips turned to a thin white line.

“The next man’s fearful shout will ring over your corpse!” Tarrus said. “What does silence accomplish?”

A few more moments passed. The woman took a breath. Her black eyes, among the wispy white strands of hair dangling off her head, widened at him. “The Mask is not ours to remove.”

Behind her, the cliff’s blazing stone faces appeared to watch him.

“This city is mine!” Tarrus said. “And everything in it is mine! I will see what is behind the mask! I will see what Lord Samael gave his life for!”

As the tip of Tarrus’s sword rested on her shoulder, the woman laughed. Further did her eyes stretch open, and she rocked back and forth. “Your shouts mean nothing!” she said with trembling breath. “Your army means nothing! Your blade against my neck means and changes nothing. Remove my head from my neck, and soon there will be two new eyes watching from the cliff.”

Tarrus roared and swung; her head bounced on the ground and rolled until her wide eyes rested on him, even as her body collapsed. He glanced up at the cliff again. The faces hadn’t changed. He turned to one of his lieutenants. “Take me to the Mask.”

“General,” the lieutenant said. “We have yet to reach

it. Warriors stand between us. They fight like demons.”

Tarrus scowled, and the lines on his face deepened. He glanced at the cliff. “You tell me the city is taken, yet there is still fighting?”

“They are surrounded and cannot escape. As well, general, they are not members of the city’s forces. They are . . . others.”

“Send all we have,” Tarrus said, climbing back on his steed. “Bend their heads to the ground or remove them from their necks.” He snapped the reins and the horse pushed south through the crowd, toward the cliff.

#

The stone faces swelled. The ringing, shouting, stamping crowd of soldiers thickened. Buildings thinned, and soon long swathes of open field lay between General Tarrus and the sharp cliff, all still within the city’s walls. Tarrus found the captain commanding the push, who stared over the heads of his soldiers from his saddle.

“What are their forces?” Tarrus asked, and the captain’s head whipped toward him. “How many remain?”

“A hundred, general,” the captain said. “They fight as if ten thousand.”

“A hundred!” Tarrus leaned across the gap between their horses and seized the collar of the captain’s armor. “I killed a hundred before I entered the city! Assemble a cavalry and charge!” He pushed the captain away. “Perhaps if a man commands them, our soldiers will rediscover their strength!” He spurred his horse, and soldiers ahead of him made a path. Stone faces, now closer and huge in his vision, stared down at him, smooth eyes following his horse.

The last soldiers parted to reveal a long field under the western wall’s shadow. Tarrus led the charge, bellowing, blood dripping from his sword as he waved it over his head. Rocky soil, scattered timber, and mounds of grass replaced field. His

horse slowed. He growled and dug his spurs into its flanks, but its speed faltered further, until it fell still, sides heaving and head tossing from side to side, stamping its hooves and bellowing.

“Beast!” Tarrus screamed, and he jumped down, pointing his sword forward, drool dripping from his lips. He glanced back at the soldiers who had followed him.

As immobile trees they stood, rooted a hundred yards behind him, armor gleaming red under the dying sun, white faces shining and black shadows stretching almost to the east wall. Tarrus stood alone, and the enemy showed itself.

Earth rose, and the grass came alive. Brown patches revealed as cloaks, timber became spears in withered hands, and swords clawed out from under the earth. Their hunched forms dangled long arms; their knuckles scraped the ground. Rags and strips of cloth and caliginous hoods twitched in each breeze, light and immaterial as leaves on autumn trees. From every side they rose, as if appearing from other worlds, and surrounded Tarrus. Under the cliff’s faces they pointed weapons, and the closest pair of white eyes in a dark hood hissed.

Male or female, young or old, Tarrus couldn’t tell. Its gray hand squeezed the hilt of its crude, curved sword, and askew feet carved through the dust as they shuffled forward. “Back to your hole, alien,” the creature said.

Tarrus’s eyes reared up to the cliff, and anger seemed to flash across the faces carved there. Anger at his grand ego and his intrusion. His heart swelled to fill his chest, and pinpricks traveled his arms.

But he gritted his teeth and snarled at the creature. “The city is mine!” he said, bringing his sword up and slapping away the other’s weapon. “Take me to the mask, or my army will return you to your ground!”

“Our ground, our ground,” the creature said, each syllable drawn out, hung, slow in arriving. “Not our ground. Your ground, man. Child of Prosfatos, and you stand on your

ground ever closer to Archilos, but it is not for you.”

Tarrus swallowed. “Meaningless!” he said. “Hiss and whisper meaningless words until your lungs shrivel, but I will see what lies behind the mask! I will find what Lord Samael failed to find!”

A den of snakes, or a thousand swords pulled from scabbards, or the wind shushing past bare branches surrounded him. “This child wishes to see Archilos,” the creature said. “Then show him.” The creature gestured, pointing twisted and knobbly fingers, and the hunched-over forms advanced.

Tarrus roared and swung at the closest. His weapon carved the air and lodged in the ground, and as he tried to wrench it free steel grips circled his neck. They squeezed the blood from his veins, and his face turned white. His mouth opened for breath, but the hands around his neck allowed nothing. His chest cried for air, and when he tried to move his feet they stayed rooted. A weight on his back toppled him, and he tasted the dirt.

“Gaze upon this ground,” the first creature said. “Or stand with your shoulders to ours.”

Tarrus cursed them, writhing, but couldn’t free himself.

“To Archilos,” the creature said, and Tarrus struggled as they dragged him south.

#

His strength gave out before they reached the cliff. A day of battle, his heavy armor, and his captors’ crushing grips rendered him still. His boots dug furrows in the ground and his head lolled until the sun fled behind the cliff.

The carved faces, from a hundred feet to inches, appraised him when the hands dumped him onto his chest. The cliff itself ended ten feet above the ground, and an overhang created a cave. Tarrus tried to rise, but his arms gave out, and the dust flowed up his nose again. As he coughed, a pair of

boots came to rest near his head, and he lifted his eyes to their occupant.

An old man, face cracked and faded, eyes sunken and dim. His bare head wrinkled like an ancient fruit. His thin hands clasped Tarrus's hand and, after a moment, helped the general rise.

Tarrus stepped back, mouth open in shock. "Lord Samael! It cannot be!"

The ancient man standing in front of him did nothing. In the cliff's shadow, the forms of the creatures slithered and flowed. "I came to find what is behind the mask!" Tarrus said. He stepped forward and gripped Samael's shoulders. "I will not stop until I have seen it!" He stepped back. "I will not stop for anything!"

Samael's long, slow breath whistled through misshapen nostrils. He stepped aside.

Tarrus approached, under the cliff's overhang, expecting a dirty hole. Instead, a swarm of gray light shined from above him, and he glanced up. As wind gusted down, a shimmering radiance glowed, rising into the sky. No sunlight, but instead like the haze of lit smoke. The ground fell away before him and carved steps led down. He took the steps as his tired legs allowed, descending farther. Samael, and the creatures, did not follow.

He reached the smooth ground, and his heart lodged in his mouth. The cave had no walls.

Like he stood within a castle of clouds, or atop the universe's last mountain, sky stretched in all directions from a round stone platform, showing him no land curling away or flat ocean horizons. Only limitless pillars of impossible narrowness punctured up and rose into infinity, black against the sky and trailing banners of smoke.

Mouth agape, Tarrus spun, searching for the mask. He glanced up, and a red, toothy crescent in the sky held Samael and the creatures, black silhouettes. "Where is it?" Tarrus shouted. "Tell me where the mask is!"

“You stand inside the throat,” Samael’s weak voice said. “And search for the lips.”

The cliff overhang slammed down, gnashing into the ground as Tarrus cried out, collapsing. Utter darkness replaced light. He pushed himself up and stumbled his way back to where the stairs had been, hands in front, finding nothing. He swung his arms, never connecting, heart pounding, fearful of falling, screaming for Samael. He spun for a vision in the black, an anchor for his location, and in the featureless dark an immense stone face, identical to the carvings on the cliff, lay in front of him. The blank, smooth eyes stared across at him. Some light shined on the face, coming from nowhere and touching nothing else.

He stepped closer, extending his hand, panting. His stomach turned as he walked, nearing the mask, yet he never reached it. His mind raced to place its size, but his every step grew it.

By the time his hand grazed the faultless stone, his breath came in shuddering gasps. Armor hanging from his shoulders bent his body toward the ground.

His knees buckled. Between the gray mask’s eyes, supported on formless glass above its mouth, he pressed his forehead to the ground. His fingers clutched, begging for dirt to grind between them.

Beams of red fire cut through him; he reared back and cried. The mask’s eyes ground open, as if a sleeping giant woke in slowness, and light poured out. The beams swirled, swiveled, until they rested on his kneeling form, turning his skin to ash.

#

His hands rubbed over his bare arms. His knees pressed into the ground. His armor gone, his form uncovered. He was warm, as if bathing. His skin prickled, his lungs drew easy breath. Light pouring over him shifted from red to white,

then red again, and then black; the colors cycled. Tarrus stood. Still the only thing for him to witness was the mask. He placed his hand against the stone again, between the eyes. "Scrape yourself away," he said. "Show me the source of your eyes."

The light kept shifting, and Tarrus pounded his hand on the stone. Pain flared up his arm for his trouble. He stumbled back, then forward again, teeth flashing red, and a whisper held him fast. Like a line down the center of his forehead, the voice traced itself, tickling his nose, watering his mouth, closing his throat, pounding his heart.

"Behind me is ARCHILOS."

The word rang inside his head. Sparks danced in his vision.

"Behind you is Prosfatos."

Like a child's babble, or a simpleton's yell, or a sleepy mutter. Prosfatos. Less than nothing compared to ARCHILOS.

"You may turn and wander back to your place." The whisper drew no breath. "And stand alongside the other children, so that none try to crack me open."

Tarrus bent forward, waiting.

"Or I may allow you a glimpse. ARCHILOS."

ARCHILOS.

"Archilos," someone whispered.

"But know and understand, child. ARCHILOS would smother this place like pain smothers laughter. So it smothers all places. For this, I must not be opened. For this, I am guarded. Or else ARCHILOS claws the face from Prosfatos, and wears it like a mask.

"So, child, choose."

Tarrus's soul slammed back into his body. His voice returned to his throat. "I want to see! I want to see what is behind the mask!" His eyes swelled out of their sockets. "Show me Archilos!"

Silence poured out of the stone face, washing over

him.

A line boomed through its center. Flickering shades of reddened black and white darted back and forth as the crack widened. Light scorched out, finally illuminating the ground under his feet: dust, sparkling, like diamonds in the dirt. Like teeth in a grave. Like stars rolling across an empty and alien heaven, searching for the place they once had, that was ripped away.

The halves of the mask drifted apart, and petrichor blew across Tarrus. Deep red leaves like drops of blood danced past his feet as black-trunked trees faded into life.

All around him, identical glowing white figures faced him. The spiderwebs wrapping them drifted in the wind; their blank faces shone. A black mountain scarred the flashing red sky above the endless height of the trees.

He walked through the leaves, caught loud in silence, and held his breath. From behind every black trunk more white, glowing figures formed, and beyond them the trees shook as a beast of smoke and moss and cast-off stars lifted itself to blot out the rest of the sky.

And another carved face appeared on the Cliff of Kurr.

POETRY BY TAMARA NASUTION
WHILE YOU SLEEP

I retreat back to church. I am a werewolf,
praying for full moon in the shape
of a thinly veiled figure who was once mine

years ago. I won't see beyond your veils,
it's dark and miles long—I am but a human,
full-blown feelings, dissolved parts.

I will bleed and falter at your sight. But
it's exhausting and I am tired. I was born
tired as the night hung onto my mother's womb;

craved another soul since I could
crawl, one without impenetrable walls. I will be
on the altar, vowing to be freed

of these fragile desires. My hands can never be
your church—I am a werewolf, longing
for the moon since I could dream.

POETRY BY KAT STUBING
THE EYE

Thunderclouds breaking under
the weight of the moon
Birds craning their necks to
assess the damage as
Salt and grime swirl down
decrepit storm drains.

Raindrops race down the
bayview window frames
Eager to join their kin in
the mud puddle below
Where the centipedes wait
for dinner to materialize.

Soft soil perfumes the damp
atmosphere up to the clouds
A hum of electricity teasing
the owls and squirrels as
Sidewalks call to children
carousels spinning in the wind.

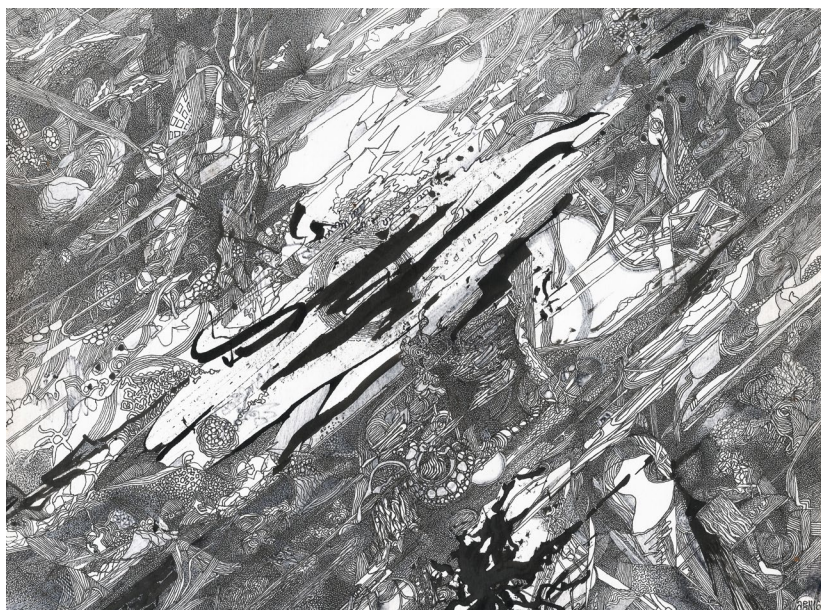
Round faces and sticky hands
decorate foggy screen doors
Muddy sneakers contorting in
a pile next to their tippy toes
A canary twittles in the quiet
that's when the lightning strikes.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY FABRICE POUSSIN
HOPE



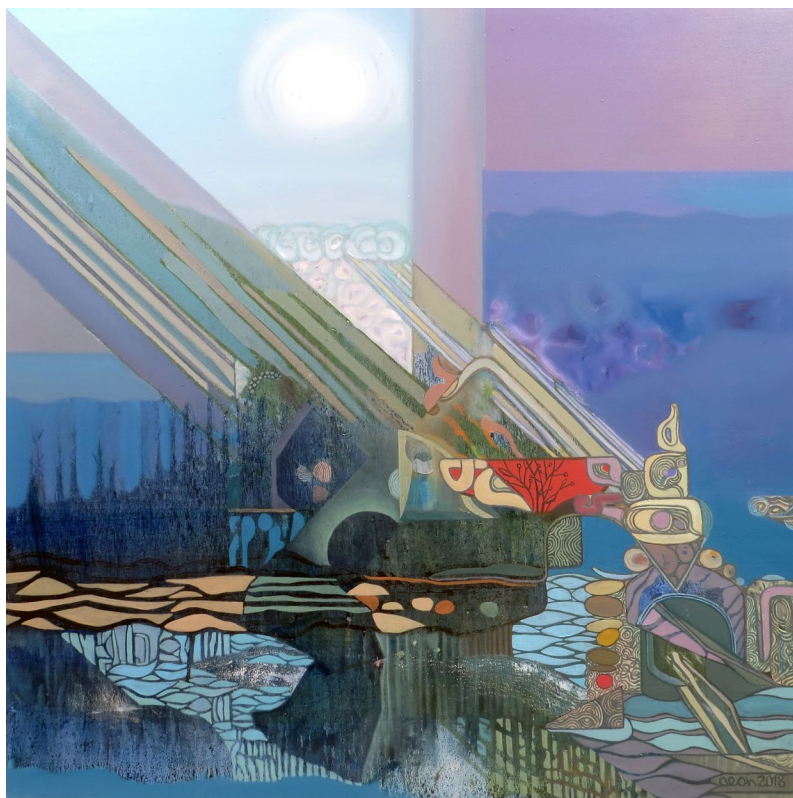
Photography

ARTWORK BY ALEXEY ADONIN
ZENITH



Black Ecco Pigment Fineliner & Black Felt-Tip Pen on Paper
2016

ARTWORK BY ALEXEY ADONIN
NEW AGE



Oil on Canvas
90 cm x 90 cm
2018

Alexey Adonin

119

PHOTOGRAPHY BY NATALIE PARDUE
R.M.B.



Photography
Tulsa Club Hotel, Oklahoma

POETRY BY JOHN GREY
MY JOURNAL OF THE PLAGUE YEAR

It's a whole new country.
We're all human silos.
The bully in the White House
had been out-bullied by a virus.
The Bible got it wrong.
It's the invisible
who shall inherit the Earth.

And I'm stuck at home
wondering if the past
will ever again be the future.
It seems like years
since I've eaten at a restaurant
or sat up at a bar.
Oh, Natural History Museum,
we hardly knew you.

At least, I'm no longer young.
I'm not home on a Saturday night,
and dateless,
not because I can't get a date
but the reason being there are none.
And what about lips.
Kissable lips.
Unmasked, unadorned lips.
Do people even have them anymore?

My wife is working from the dining room.
I'm in my office writing.
I avoid the news.
There are more people these days

famous for being dead
than living.
Even the Kardashians
are cocooned in
their own self-importance.
So there's no difference there
at least.

I might go for a walk later,
though my neighborhood
is more like
an obstacle course these days.
I'm referring to you, stranger,
who's also out
for a stroll.
Every sudden side-step
adds six feet to my journey.

Sadly, the wide world
is no longer available.
Even the next state is toxic.
I can always call somebody –
as long as they breathe away
from the speaker.

So all I can do is wait this out.
Or catch the miserable disease
so it can wait me out.
And get nostalgic
for those times
I'd sit in the coffee house
with a cup of joe
while whining with the usual crowd
about how bad we've got it.
That's what I miss most of all –
the joy of complaining
when there's nothing to complain about.

FICTION BY TRAVIS FLATT
THE GLEAMING CUBE

Tommy fought against digesting his tie.

His wife, Joan, had ordered it for his interview. Sewn from unique wool, the retailer claimed it would resist his body of acidic gel. This Joan read on BubbleBabble – their gelatinous cube social media site. Apparently, interviewers feel comfortable with something specific to focus on. “When speaking to a gelatinous cube, an interviewer needs to know where to direct their speech. So give them something to talk to.”

That morning, Tommy had absorbed the navy blue tie into the center of his pale green bulk, and if one ignored the ten-foot cube of slime encompassing the tie, Joan said it worked; it did provide something to focus on.

When nervous, Tommy wedged into corners, and after he’d slid into Tordor Atrocity United’s waiting room, he oozed against two walls. It was a solid corner: cobblestone meeting at a right angle. His dad always said, “It took the edge off,” to be resting all snug and supported.

T.A.U. was a classy dungeon, even if a hell of a long teleport from home. It sure beat the county’s number one employer: Choth’s spike factory, with its poison sorcery stinking for miles. T.A.U. was corporate, seven floors deep. The stonework looked new – Second Age – and the necromancy board had sprung for some exotic spiders; Tommy marveled at the intricate webbing in the corners –

“Welcome to Tordor Atrocities United. You must be Tommy!” said the receptionist, a prim, young mummy – well, young for a mummy. She must have been expecting him. Maybe no other cubes answered the ad?

There wasn’t a trace of blood-staining on the brimstone chairs, and the torches were a rich, milk-chocolate oak –

“ARE YOU TOMMY,” said the receptionist. “TOMMY GUTHASH?”

Tommy was accustomed to shouting. Preceding him came the millennia-old notion that gelatinous cubes were a mindless species like zombies or enchanted carpets. It amazed Tommy that so many monsters held *démodé* beliefs about cubes even in the present age.

It was the slowness.

“Yes,” said Tommy. “I’m Tommy.”

“Fantastic. They’ll be with you soon.” The mummy’s desk was made of elven bone. She leaned back in her chair, flipping through an issue of *Dismemberment*.

Bubbles rippled through Tommy’s slimy bulk. GERD. He’d need to tell Joan that the new lamb brain bagel spread wasn’t sitting well. He hoped that didn’t hurt her feelings. She always bought them new things to try. She was so thoughtful and adventurous.

Now came the waiting; it was easier not to melt his tie while occupied. Did the blue tie make him look like a peacock?

The T.A.U. website had posted: “Looking for security personnel – 5 gold an hour. Requirements: two years of dungeon experience, must be chaotic evil but team-oriented.”

Tommy had been filling these things out since he got his master’s in Ancient Languages – a useless degree outside academia. Then, after two years, he’d felt like he’d earned a degree in pleasure reading. But he loved research – sorcery research – yet discovered those jobs were filled by warlocks. No respectable dungeon held a cube on staff, not even a community ruin.

A false door groaned open in the wall behind the mummy, revealing a dark corridor, out of which came an imp, followed by a floating fire elemental who leaned down to pat her on her tiny, green shoulder, sending off little, fishy-smelling furls of smoke. Finally, the fire elemental announced that the imp should expect a call. She nodded and shuffled outside.

The elemental’s presence raised the temperature thirty degrees. Tommy’s slime glistened. He bubbled. He fought not to cast translucence and disappear. No! Joan would be disap-

pointed. And anyway, it was too late now. The elemental's charcoal briquette eyes had landed square on the blue tie.

Tommy hated fire – his primary weakness. It drove his GERD crazy. He rippled internal bubbles like a water cooler.

The fire elemental's head was like a campfire blazing up from his gray asbestos suit. "Tommy! We're ready for you."

Tommy thought he might have a reflux attack and vomit corrosive slime all over the waiting room. Regardless, he squared his shoulders – one of his father's favorite cubisms – and oozed forward in affirmation. The elemental's eyes lifted in what might have been a smile, and he beckoned through the doorway behind the receptionist.

Because Tommy's top speed was about a foot every fifteen seconds, the lightly hovering elemental was long gone by the time Tommy crept by the mummy's desk, allowing her to wink her unbandaged eye several times before she grew bored and went back to her magazine.

They crept down the hallway, the luminescent elemental floating ahead. His loud, patronizing voice boomed in the stone corridor. "Tommy, I'm Head Coordinator of Dungeon Patrols here at Tordor Atrocities, Bob Aldr."

And as Tommy trailed behind, he fell further and further behind. His ninth-grade gym teacher, a true ogre of an ogre, had once bellowed: "Tommy, are you doing those laps backward or forward?"

Along the corridor, Tommy passed a series of plaque-bearing doors, "Legal" and "Sorceries." He wished to be behind one of those doors. What a job! In "Sorceries," a corporation like T.A.U paid monsters to read tomes.

When he met up with Aldr at the end of the hall, the spirit was tapping away at his Ambrosia™ phone with gloved fingers. The hall ended in an arched double-door carved into the stonework, decorated by all manner of runes and symbols.

Aldr nodded at the door-carving, still tapping at his phone. "Can you read those, Tom?"

Tommy saw runes in Elvish, Fey, Sylvan—a smattering of dozens of languages. Tommy picked an Elvish phrase that jumped out at him: “Come on in and sit a spell?”

As soon as Tommy spoke this aloud—in Elvish—the stone doors rumbled and swung open.

“Attaboy,” Aldr said and drifted inside. Tommy slid in after.

The doorway opened into a circular chamber, book-lined and lantern-lit. In the center of the chamber was an ancient mahogany table adorned with gold and jewels. At this table sat an enormous troll who sat smiling. He was shirtless, muscle-bound, and wore a sword slung on his back that appeared to be six feet long.

Aldr swept an arm toward the troll. “Tommy, meet Retrog the Destroyer!”

The troll jumped up and bounded across the chamber, grinning. Tommy attempted to inch away, but too late. “Greetings, slime monster,” roared Retrog the Destroyer as he thrust his scaly arm outward as if to shake Tommy’s non-existent hand. Instead, the troll’s arm sloshed elbow-deep into Tommy’s slimy bulk.

This hurt. Although he could smell his body-acid sizzle the troll’s scales, Retrog only grinned and jerked his arm up and down until he finally yanked it free. “Retrog’s glad to meet you, Tommy the cube!”

Aldr spoke from behind Tommy – he was trapped. “Retrog’s the head of our upper-level security here, Tom, level one through four.”

“Kill!” said Retrog.

“Yes, Retrog stops any adventurers who attempt to plunder our facility. He runs a very efficient team.”

Tommy was sweating in thick rivulets down his side-planes. The chamber’s temperature was rising and rising. Aldr, who hadn’t moved from behind his back plane, began to loudly shuffle through some papers he’d produced from the gods knew where. “Tommy, it says on your resume that you’ve got two degrees. Hmm. Masters in . . . Ancient Languages.

Like to read, do you, Tom?"

Tommy bubbled and sweated. Retrog grinned. Aldr, shuffled papers. "Yes, sir. I took some time to go back to school—"

"And . . . before that, you worked for, now was this your family's dungeon . . . '06 to '08? What did you do there, Tommy?"

"Kill?" said Retrog. He cracked his mammoth knuckles.

Tommy attempted to slide sideways and un-sandwich himself from between his interviewers. No such luck – Retrog and Aldr easily side-stepped to follow him.

Aldr reshuffled the papers: "So, you graduated, Ancient Languages. Then you worked for your – what, your dad? Then you go back to school for more Ancient Languages?"

"My uncle. I worked at my uncle's dungeon. Well, he was a mini-boss. And I went to grad school at the same time."

Tommy tried to remember the translucent spell. It seemed so much easier to run. Why wasn't he home reading a book? But mercifully, Aldr floated around from behind his back and into his field of vision and over to the table. "Of course, Tom. And that's a hell of a tie, by the way. What do you think your most valuable skills are as a mob creature?"

"Kill!"

Tommy saw that a pool of acidic sweat was puddling around his boxy form. It ate at Retrog's leather boots. The Destroyer didn't seem to notice.

Tommy fell into his rehearsed answer. "I think I bring a mastery and understanding of the history of an adventurer's language and the ability to communicate to my comrades in the speech . . ."

Aldr patted the table next to him, charring a hand-print into the polished wood. "Retrog! Have some manners and grab a seat, buddy. Let's get to know Tom."

"Kill," muttered Retrog. The troll shuffled back to the table and sat.

Aldr, who held Tommy's badly charred resume, leaned

forward and steepled his hands. “Tom, what do you think is your biggest weakness as an employee?”

Shit. No matter how often he practiced that question with Joan, Tommy could never devise an answer that didn’t sound moronic. He was certain no such answer existed. “I think that my abilities might tend to cause me to overestimate my opponents. But at the same time, I’m always prepared.”

Aldr dropped his voice low and spoke in a confidential tone: “Tom, you seem nervous, bud. Let’s talk monster to monster. What are you really looking for in a career? Where do you see yourself – big picture – in, say, five years? You can come over here. I hope you don’t mind that I didn’t leave you a chair. I didn’t think your kind used ’em.”

Tommy began to slide toward the table. Aldr nodded. “Good, Tom. All right, five years? What do you see?”

“I can just be honest, sir?”

“You don’t have to call me ‘sir,’ Tommy. We’re just talking here.”

Tommy eventually reached his side of the table. “I’ve always wanted to work in research. With sorcery. I’m very talented at –”

Aldr leaned back in his chair and scratched at his non-existent chin in a thoughtful gesture. “You know this is a patrol position you’re applying for, right? Your job would be security. Working with Retrog –”

“Kill!”

“– Retrog here every day, making sure that our upper levels are protected, and stopping adventurers from reaching the lower levels where we keep . . . well, I’m not at liberty to talk to you about the lower levels.”

“I understand, Mr. Aldr, but this really is my only opportunity to tell you directly that I’m just as qualified as any warlock or lich, how –”

Aldr hovered higher at his end of the table, signifying that he was standing “Okay, Tom. Thanks for coming in today. What I think you should do is keep your eye out for any

openings you might be interested in. Just check our website, it's very streamlined. You can submit your resume online."

Tommy shouted, "I submitted my god's damned resume already. You were just looking at it."

Retrog stood, flipping the table. "Kill!"

Aldr turned and slapped a hand on the troll's shoulder. He spoke in a placating tone. "No, Retrog. No kill. We're going to see Tommy out. An interview is a tense situation, and I may have accidentally touched a nerve."

Retrog sat, looking disappointed. "Kill?"

Aldr moved toward the door. "I'm sure you can find your way back out to the reception room, right, Tommy? We'll be in touch, okay?"

Another interview. All in all, this probably hadn't been the worst since he'd graduated, and it certainly wouldn't be the last. If he could borrow the money, he might try to go back to school and earn his doctorate. Or he could look into a degree in something else, possibly communications, or psychology?

Or, he could try his hand at being a bard. He'd written a few songs when he was an undergrad. Joan would stand by him—for a few years, anyway.

#

Two weeks later, Tommy was filling out yet another online application when Bob Aldr called. Somehow, he wasn't surprised. Bob began by saying he'd been impressed by the chaotic evil of Tommy's outburst. Aldr asked if he'd start on the following Tuesday—Monday was a holiday—and feeling as though he had no choice, Tommy assured his new boss he'd be there Tuesday morning and held back tears when he related the news to Joan, feeling a mixture of spite and gratefulness toward her when she promptly announced the news on BubbleBabble, thereby locking him into the job, and then insisting they go meet friends at the new tavern and celebrate.

POETRY BY VALENCIA WILLIANTO

POETRY IN THE EYES

There's a man walking in a green jacket / a man carrying
an orange plastic / a man in a soldier sweater / a traditional
english pub laying in the corner of the street / "*The Cricket-
ers*" / it was born earlier than I am / you can simply tell
by looking at the shape of the building / a woman laughing
with two of her friends / a furry brown and white dog look-
ing at me / I want to know the name of a man who shouted
Merry Christmas / while rowing a safety boat with one of his
friends / I think he wears a Santa Claus hat / there's a fine
art shop / an old record store / and a bookshop named Ox-
fam / I bought one of the books for two-ninety-nine pounds
to help overcome poverty / there are notes inside the book /
it's definitely second-hand / which makes it even more pre-
cious / I am not taking things for granted / this town is full
of life / and I am going to cherish

DRAMA BY ROBIN CANTWELL
DUNG BEETLES

An art studio.

*Applying the finishing touches to a painting is **Cathy** (late 20s).*

*Enter **Kyle** (late 20s). His eyes are glued to his phone.*

CATHY *(nervously)* So...what do you think?

***Kyle** doesn't flicker.*

CATHY ...Kyle.

KYLE *(still looking at phone)* Mmmhmm?

CATHY Can't you even look up for a second?

KYLE Yep. Just...give me a moment.

CATHY I don't believe this.

KYLE Fuck me. Up twenty percent in one morning!
Twenty bloody percent.

***Kyle** finally looks up.*

KYLE Oh, wow. Look at that.

CATHY 'Wow'? That's all I get? I've been working on
this for three months!

KYLE I know! And it looks great.

CATHY I'm not a pet doing a fucking trick for you.

KYLE Is that your mother?

CATHY ...It's a self-portrait.

KYLE Well, it's lovely.

CATHY Forget it.

KYLE Sorry, sweets. I'm just a little distracted. Have you seen this?

He holds up his phone.

KYLE DUNG is skyrocketing!

CATHY "DUNG?"

KYLE Yeah. Decentralised User Network Gas. DUNG. It's the next big thing (*looks at phone again*). Fuck, it's gone up another six percent. Are you kidding me? I knew I should have put it all in DUNG. Bitcoin's going nowhere these days.

CATHY This is my livelihood, Kyle.

KYLE Yeah. And this is mine.

CATHY What, staring at green and red lines all day? That's not a job, it's a lottery ticket.

KYLE First of all, my lines are never red. Second, how much are you going to sell that painting

for, realistically?

CATHY I don't know. A few hundred? Maybe even a grand?

KYLE Hmm. That's nice. Only I made several times that while we've been having this conversation.

CATHY This isn't a conversation.

KYLE What is it, then?

CATHY An ego trip. A parade – no, a bloody Roman triumph for your pathetic guessing games. You don't have a career to call your own, so you just sit there all day, trading meaningless, worthless algorithms to give yourself some morsels of self-esteem. Because you didn't get your hands dirty when you had a chance and now you're one of the left-behinds. You may as well fuck off to the metaverse while you're at it.

KYLE Well, if I had enough DUNG, maybe I could afford to live in the metaverse.

Cathy turns away.

KYLE Oh, come on, don't be like that.

Cathy looks for something in a bag.

KYLE Sweets –

CATHY Don't call me that. I hate it when you call me that.

KYLE Fine, Cathy.

No response.

KYLE Catherine?

CATHY I haven't been called that since I was a child.

She turns round. She holds a hammer.

KYLE Slight overreaction.

She stands over her painting.

KYLE No, sweets, don't. You've worked so hard on this painting. You can't keep sabotaging yourself like this.

CATHY I'm not.

She grabs his phone.

KYLE Hey!

She smashes the phone to pieces.

Silence. Kyle stands there, motionless.

Cathy goes back to painting.

KYLE But...my DUNG?

CATHY I'm sure it will still be there. But I won't.

KYLE Painting's shit by the way.

CATHY I was waiting for that.

KYLE Doesn't even look like you.

CATHY An art critic, are you now? What will you be tomorrow? A fucking astronaut? You see life through a touchscreen, you pathetic, delusional sad sack. Threatened by the success of your own girlfriend. Some man you are.

A pause as this all sinks in for Kyle.

KYLE Can I at least check the price of DUNG on your phone?

She huffs and checks her phone.

CATHY *(holding it up to Kyle)* Oh, look. It's crashing.

KYLE *(panicking)* But I need to get out while I'm on top. Please. Please let me borrow your phone. Cathy, please.

He falls to his knees and begs.

CATHY You know, all this turpentine is giving me a headache. I think I'll go outside now. Back to civilization.

She leaves with her phone.

Kyle picks up the hammer and stares at the painting.

The End

POETRY BY SAMUEL SPENCER

EPHEMERAL

I am just a boy
(and maybe I will always be one).

Damn this feeling,
this boy inside me,
this man behind the curtain,
calling the shots,
paying for milkshakes,
sipping gin.

I go to work
wishing I were a boy.
When I was a boy, I wished
to be a man.

I understand, now, why childhood
was better. I never clocked in
to the swing sets, was never taxed
for climbing to the tops of trees.

When I was held
at gunpoint
at the age of ten,
I became a man.

When my grandfather died
in my twenties,
I was once again a boy.

When I lived alone
for the first time in my life,

I was neither.
I was nothing.
I was wishing
to be anything.

These days,
I'm only a boy
when I drink tea,
a very grown-up drink.

And when I drink (not tea),
it is because I am
a man.

POETRY BY LESLIE CAIRNS

SCREEN DOOR

When I moved out/I remembered the crinkling of the crickets/not knowing I would move to Denver/but knowing I would fall apart like confetti cake baked too quickly/not accounting for elevation/baking under different pressures/wondering where the candles went/before, the screen door was always halfway broken/made a creaking noise/but still is what I conjure up when I think of 'home'/the screen door was how the family dog got outside the house/three months after I was forced to leave/and he got hit by a car at night/there was no one left to watch him sneak out the door/sending lullabies to call him back.



ARTIST SPOTLIGHT

THE
ZEE
ZEE
COLLECTION

ABOUT THE ARTIST

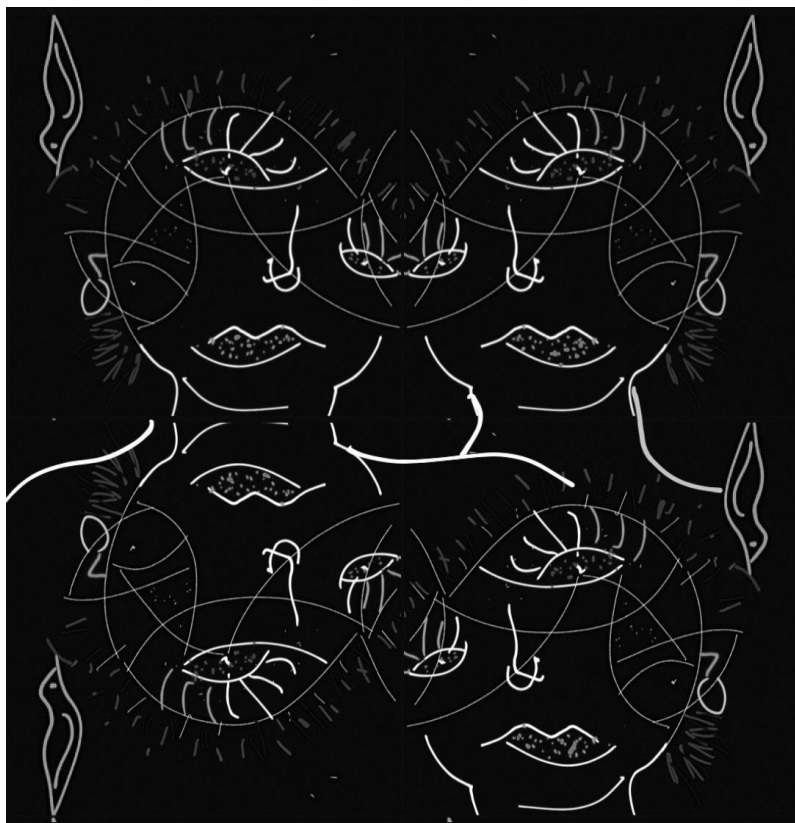
Am I in love with art? I draw on the newspaper or a book page, listening to the kitchen radio, rainfall. I draw to love, I draw to do and I draw to hope for. I keep my imagination close to my heart. The real art in life is between hanging on and letting go. I hang on art in life. Is this my gratitude? I believe in life and art is at its core. One day, I will draw the shape of a heart.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ZEE ZEE
GRACE AFTER SCHOOL



Photography
16" x 20"
2021

ARTWORK BY ZEE ZEE
I CAN'T GO WITH THE FLOW



10.8" x 11.2"
2021

Zee Zee

141

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ZEE ZEE
PATIENCE 43



Photography
32.25" x 12"
2021

ARTIST BIOGRAPHIES

Kim Abi Zeid Daou

I am a storyteller, artist, and Ph.D. candidate at McGill University. At the heart of my stories is an exploration of perceptual biases, neuroscience, and the dynamic and poetic ways in which we create and conceptualize narratives and experiences. You can find my poetry published or forthcoming in *Nailed Magazine* (2020), *Girl Museum* (2020), *Hairstreak Butterfly Review* (2021), *Sidereal Magazine* (2022), *Brave Voices Magazine* (2022), and the *Scapegoat Review* (2022).

Alexey Adonin

Alexey Adonin, an artist from Jerusalem, explores the point of convergence between abstraction and surrealism to create a channel of communication between his inner world and the viewers, not only to share his personal vision but to invite viewers to elaborate their personal interpretations and narratives, establishing deep involvement both in the emotional aspect and in the intellectual one. Go to www.alexeyadoninart.com or find him on instagram @otherworldly-dream!

Sam Aleks

Sam Aleks (Samvel Aleksanyan) is an Armenian-born, American artist/writer living in Los Angeles. His art has been featured in *Canyon Voices Winter 2018* and *RAR Summer 2019*, and has been displayed in the Northridge Annual Student Art Exhibit, Spring 2014, and in the NOVA Gallery, Fall 2014.

Emily Andres

Emily Andres is a young new writer, passionate about highlighting underground voices and detailing her experiences in recovery. She reads bizarro fiction and writes mainly nonfiction. She has articles on women's and LGBTQ experiences scheduled to come out in 2022.

Dan Arsky

As a Brazilian artist and graphic design professional with illustration, art direction, and visual communications experience, Dan Arsky is constantly working on artworks and writings worldwide for businesses such as breweries and publishing houses. He used to work on magazines as a designer and is currently working as a design analyst for a major law firm in Brazil.

Stephen Baily

Stephen Baily has published short fiction in some fifty-five journals, including *Mercurius*, *The Offing*, *Atticus Review*, *Lunch Ticket*, and *Lotus-eater*. He's also the author of ten plays and three novels, including *Markus Klyner, MD*, *FBI* (Fellow Traveler Press). He lives in France.

Abigail Belcastro

Abigail has a MFA with Fairleigh Dickinson University, and her essay "*A Time for Fantasy*" has been published with *Fiction Southeast*.

Nicola Brayan

Nicola Brayan is a young aspiring artist from Sydney, Australia. She rediscovered her passion for art during the pandemic. She uses vivid colours and contrast to capture emotions and expression. Her work is a love letter to what it means to be human. More of her work can be found on Instagram @an.aesthetic.mirror.

Leslie Cairns

Leslie Cairns is a writer who lives in Denver, Colorado. She holds her M.A. in English from a school in Buffalo, New York. In 2020, she worked as a Poetry Fellow for Denver Lighthouse Writers under poet Carolina Ebeid. She writes poems for homes about mental health, loneliness, and queering the story.

James Callan

James Callan grew up in Minneapolis, Minnesota. He lives on the Kapiti Coast, New Zealand, on a small farm with his wife, Rachel, and his little boy, Finn.

Robin Cantwell

Robin is a London-based playwright, poet, and fiction writer with themes ranging from toxic masculinity to the technological singularity. He's a graduate of the Faber Academy, and his work has appeared in *The London Reader*, *Fauxmoir*, *A Thin Slice Of Anxiety*, *Bright Flash Literary Review*, *Silver Birch Press*, *Molecule*, *Poetica Review*, *Nine Muses Poetry*, and *Pure Slush*.

Sarah Deckro

Sarah is a teacher, writer, and photographer with a passion for stories, whether they are told in literature, fairy tales, music, art, or the history of humanity. Her poetry and photography have appeared in a number of publications including *Curating Alexandria*, *Red Earth Review*, *Camas Magazine*, *Waxwing* and the anthology *Take a Stand, Art Against Hate* by Raven Chronicles Press.

Daniel Deisinger

Daniel is alive. He's usually helping seniors play bingo. His work has appeared in more than twenty publications, including *Havik*, *White Wall Review*, *Castabout Literature*, *Defenestration Magazine*, and *Ripples in Space*. His serial "Voices in My Head" is available on Kindle Vella. His twitter is @Danny_Deisinger and his website is saturdaystory-time.weebly.com.

Delta N.A.

Paired in art and life, Delta N.A. work simultaneously on each artwork with a shared language that reveals deep meanings and speaks directly to the heart. In the work of the artists, a timeless story develops, placing figures and forms in a subtle and ethereal space between dream and reality, in which the soft flow of emotions and intuition collects the sense of a free and introspective existence. The years spent on countless trips to discover the world have deeply marked the art of Delta N.A.

Béibhinn Sullivan Dubh

Béibhinn is an emerging poet/writer from Cork in Southern Ireland. She received an M.A. in Creative Writing from the University of Limerick in January and is working towards her first collection.

Common themes in their work include intergenerational trauma, patriarchy, and addiction/mental health issues.

Travis Flatt

Travis Flatt is a teacher living outside Nashville, Tennessee. He wants a PS5 but didn't get one for Christmas. Also, he enjoys fluffy dogs and fluffy dog related activities. His stories appear in *Brain Mill Press*, *Ripples in Space*, *Ember Chasm Review*, and several other publications.

Rosie Garland

Rosie Garland, named by Val McDermid one of the UK's most compelling LGBT writers, is author of *The Night Brother*, described by *The Times* as "a delight... with shades of Angela Carter."

Pawel Grajert

Pawel Grajert is a writer and filmmaker working in Poland and the United States.

John Grey

John Grey is an Australian poet and current U.S. resident, recently published in *Sheepshead Review*, *Stand*, *Poetry Salzburg Review* and *Hollins Critic*. John's latest books – *Leaves On Pages*, *Memory Outside The Head*, and *Guest Of Myself* – are available through Amazon.

Matt Gulley

Matt Gulley is thirty-four years old. He attended Wayne State University in Detroit and the MFA program at Long Island University in Brooklyn. He currently resides in Brooklyn with his girlfriend, Jenna, and tries to write a little bit every day.

Glenn Howard

Glenn Howard is a writer from Toronto, Ontario. He serves as Editor-in-Chief for the University of Victoria's undergraduate literary journal, *This Side of West*. His fiction has appeared in the *San Joaquin Review* and elsewhere.

Jordan James

Jordan James has been published in *Cagibi*, *Throats to the Sky*, *Product*, *Kalopsia*, *The Song Between our Stars*, and *The Robert Frost Review*, with works forthcoming in *The Westchester Review* and *Poet's Choice*. He is currently a graduate instructor at USM working on his Ph.D. in Creative Writing.

Katey Linskey

Katey Linskey is a writer. She draws from her experiences growing up in Boston and living in India and Guatemala. Her work will be published in a forthcoming issue of *West Review*.

Janna Lopez

Janna Lopez is an intuitive book coach, creative writing teacher with a MFA, and published author of *Me, My Selfie & Eye*. She's completing her second and third books: a collection of poetry, *Win Some & Fuckdamonium*, and *The Art & Invitation of Self-Conversation – Writing That Moves You Beyond Fear to Freedom*, based on her work with hundreds of writing clients. She leads creative writing retreats for individuals and small groups in Santa Fe, New Mexico, through Land of Enchantment Writing.

Margaret Marcum

Margaret Marcum lives in Delray Beach with her two cats, Angel and Alice. Her poems have appeared in *Amethyst Review*, *Scapegoat Review*, *October Hill Magazine*, *Writing in a Woman's Voice*, and *Children, Churches, and Daddies*, among others. She was a finalist for the 2021 Rash Award in Poetry.

John Morabito

Born in 1987, John Morabito has been making photographs for the last twenty years. John studied at UMass Lowell as a student of Arno Rafael Minkinen, where he received a BFA with a concentration in fine art photography. John's work is largely documentary in nature and centers around themes of love, loss, and loneliness. His subjects often include his family, partners, and friends, but sometimes include passers-by. Primarily shooting 35mm B & W film, John also uses digital and color film.

Ben Nardolilli

Ben Nardolilli lives in New York City. His work has appeared in *Perigee Magazine*, *Red Fez*, *Danse Macabre*, *The 22 Magazine*, *Quail Bell Magazine*, *Elimae*, *Local Train Magazine*, *The Minetta Review*, and *Yes Poetry*. He blogs at mirrorsponge.blogspot.com.

Tamara Nasution

Tamara Nasution is a twenty-six-year-old queer female, born and raised in a small town in Indonesia. She writes poems as a way to unwind and make sense of her life and personal experiences. Tamara's writings are mostly self-taught by their enthusiastic consumption of confessional poetry, and she has had some pieces of her work selected for publication.

Natalie Pardue

Natalie Pardue is a Oklahoma-based photographer at Future Focus Photography, which create imaginative and experimental sci-fi digital art using robots. The goal for this project is to show everyday scenarios where robots replace humans. You can find more about the project [@future_focus_photography](https://www.instagram.com/future_focus_photography).

Erik Peters

Erik Peters is a teacher and avid medievalist from Vancouver, Canada. Throughout his career, Erik has worked with marginalised and disadvantaged students, and this has profoundly impacted his writing. Erik has been published in numerous magazines and websites over the past two years, including *Coffin Bell*, *Showbear Family Circus*, *Prospectus*, *Wingless Dreamer*, and *The Dead Mule School*. You can find links to all Erik's publications at erikpeters.ca or [@erikpeterswrites](https://www.instagram.com/erikpeterswrites).

Meg Pokrass

Meg Pokrass is the author of 8 collections of flash and microfiction and two-time recipient of San Francisco's Blue Light Book Award. She is Founding Co-Editor of *Best Microfiction*.

Fabrice Poussin

Fabrice Poussin teaches French and English at Shorter University.

Author of novels and poetry, his work has appeared in *Kestrel*, *Symposium*, *The Chimes*, and many other magazines. His photography has been published in *The Front Porch Review*, *the San Pedro River Review*, as well as other publications.

Sabahat Quadri

Sabahat Quadri has a degree in graphic design from the Indus Valley School of Art & Architecture, Karachi. For more than twenty-five years, she has worked in the publishing industry in various capacities. She is the published author of a romance novella, *Butterfly Season*, under the pseudonym Natasha Ahmed, and currently writes educational digital content for an EdTech company. In June 2020, two months after her brother's shocking death from COVID and three months into complete lockdown, Sabahat took up watercolour painting after a gap of twenty-seven years. She mostly paints scenes from her favourite city – Karachi – and is still relearning long-forgotten skills learned in school.

Grace Schwenk

Grace Schwenk is a writer from the Bitterroot Valley of Montana.

Tomislav Silipetar

In 2014, Tomislav graduated from the Academy of Fine Arts in Zagreb in the class of Igor Rončević-Painting Department. In 2015, he became a member of HDLU. In addition to many group exhibitions, he has had solo exhibitions in Croatia as well as in other countries. He was the winner of the Rector's Award for Excellence in 2013. Tomislav's paintings are mostly made in acrylic, and the themes vary from solitude and isolation to the very existence of humanity in a society that condemns.

Samuel Spencer

Samuel Spencer grew up in Africa until he was eighteen years old. He moved to America to study English at John Brown University and is currently studying at Lindenwood University, pursuing an MFA in creative writing. His poems explore different topics such as location, purpose, and identity.

Kat Stubing

Kat Stubing was born into the sticky heat of summer and has been searching for the right words ever since. Her poems have been published in *Beyond Words*, *Hare's Paw*, and *The Closed Eye Open*. Kat lives and works in New York City.

Rebecca Thrush

Rebecca has had about twenty poems published. Most notably, her work was chosen last year for *Line of Advance's* 2021 Wright Award series and *Viewless Wings' Scary Poetry Contest*. She also has artwork online with various publications.

Valencia Wilianto

Valencia Wilianto is a poet, writer and B.Sc. Psychology graduate from an Australian University. She was a distinguished guest for the *Annie Q. Podcast*. She has taken a part in two anthologies, titled “*Embracing Flaws, the key to acceptance*” and “*snippets of life*.” Her first and forthcoming chapbook collection is titled “*What You Need*.” Her monthly poetry newsletter can be found at valenciawilianto.substack.com. You can also find her on Instagram, TikTok, Twitter, and Tumblr @PoetryOfHvaw.

Fiona Wilkes

Fiona Wilkes is a current Ph.D. Candidate at the University of Western Australia, specialising in English & Literary Studies. A fierce feminist, her work focuses on the plights of women & queer folk of the past, present, and future. This particular story is a retelling of the Rapunzel fairytale, reimagining Mother Gothel as a traumatised young Irish mother mistreated by a Mother & Baby Home.

David E. Williams

As a grandson of a graduate of Leavenworth at Kansas with a triple degree in Poverty Studies, Existential Angst, and Wages of Moonlighting with Moonshine, and as a native of Absurdlachian eastern Kentucky, David Earl Williams hopes his writing honors the ages-old tradition among The Lower, Lesser, and the Other Non-Evolved Peoples of courting the spirits and peddling derange-

ments in lieu of in-vain prayers to the universe for mercies and justices unlikely ever to appear.

Zee Zee

I love the carved images on the early Minoan sealstones. They are tantalising, inscrutable, grotesque. Mediterranean is my culture and heritage. Am I in love with art? The real art in life is between hanging on and letting go. I hang on to art in life. 2022 started with the 11th All Women International Art Awards and Exhibition, Special Recognition Award for Excellence in Art, and a group exhibition in the United States, along with several other exhibitions and shows. It's a pleasure to be in *Penumbra! Literature and Art Journal*, *Cold Mountain Review*, and *Apricity Magazine*.

Kuo Zhang

Kuo Zhang is a faculty member at the University of Vermont. Her poem, "*One Child Policy*," was awarded second place in the 2012 Society for Humanistic Anthropology [SHA] Poetry Competition. Her poems have appeared in numerous literary magazines, including *Gyroscope Review*, *Coffin Bell Journal*, *The Roadrunner Review*, *Lily Poetry Review*, *Mom Egg Review*, *Bone Bouquet*, *K'in*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, *Rigorous*, *Adanna Literary Journal*, *Raising Mothers*, and *MUTHA Magazine*.

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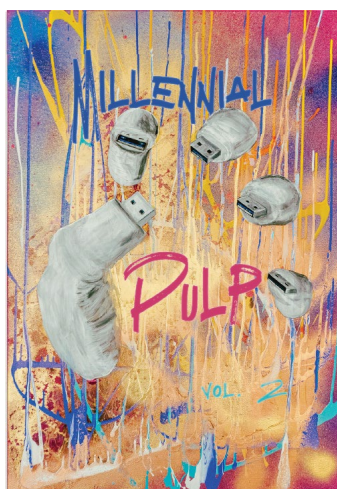
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