

# MILLENNIAL PULP

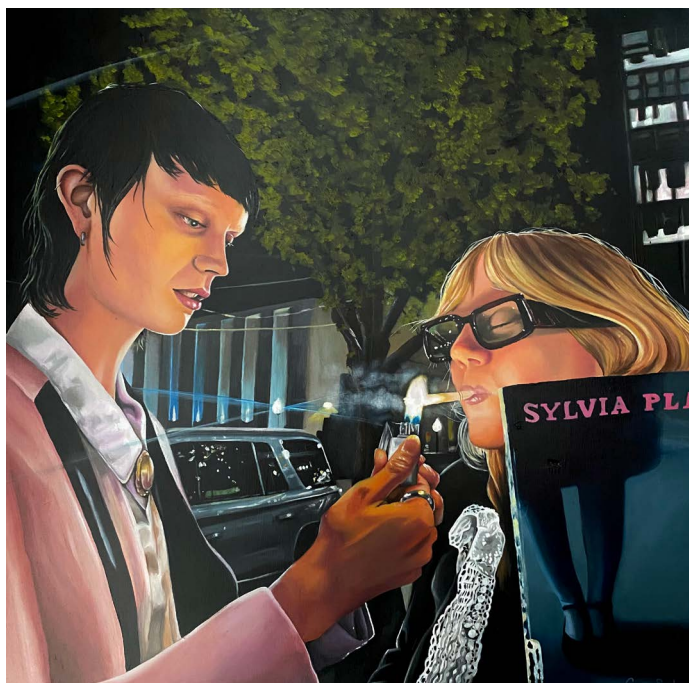
VOL. 5



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## Cover Art

### *WE WERE GIRLS TOGETHER!*

by Cameron Shipley

Medium : Oil on wood panel

Size : 24" x 24"

Inspiration : "I think the moment of collective grief we felt together changed us as women." Two friends were visiting me in Tulsa, we were all freshly struck with grief, and leaning on one another for comfort and compassion. This painting is a testament to that moment and how we held each other.

# 2025 MASTHEAD

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*Isaac Russo*

## Fiction Editor



*Breanne Berenyi*

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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 5 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

POETRY BY ALAN MEYROWITZ  
**THREE LINE POEM**

This poem has three lines

This is the second

This is the third

Don't believe all you read

FICTION BY LANGSTON PRINCE

## SHADOWBOXING

The girl was possessed with a demon. It came from the deepest pits of hell, wormed its way through layer after layer of metaphysical space into the real world and then burrowed right into her psyche. A priest, Father Ilya Kominsky, a Russian-American Catholic, had been dispatched. This wasn't his first or second exorcism, but it was only his third. And he didn't feel prepared at all. As he stalked up the stairs to the third-floor apartment where the girl was being restrained by her family, he tried to stop his hands from shaking and beads of sweat from forming on his forehead. It was unreasonably cold in the stairwell for the beginning of fall, but Father Kominsky didn't notice. Exorcisms weren't something that got easier to handle with time. They were like getting teeth pulled, except with more biting. Secretly, Father Kominsky resented his mentor, Father Bertrand Scott, for dying and leaving all the exorcisms for him.

John Idle didn't know any of this. He just drove a cab. Specifically, he drove cab A394D6, the cab that had picked up Father Kominsky from St. Andrews, driven him a mile west, then a mile south to the nondescript yellow apartments where he'd got out, told the driver to wait, then anxiously dashed upstairs. John didn't ask any hard questions, he just drove. That was his policy: small talk and directions only. Nothing else.

Once, he'd pried too much and ended up having to comfort a girl after she'd been left at the altar. He should've figured from the wedding dress and running mascara that something was wrong. Hey, can't blame a guy for being curious, right? But he should've learned his lesson by then. Before that, John had asked too many questions of the wrong people and he'd been forced into an early retirement

from boxing. So, now, John didn't ask any tough or probing questions. He just did as he was told. And he'd been told to wait, so he waited. At first, in silence. He'd had music on, but he'd turned the radio off when the Father got in the car. He wasn't sure if the 80s rock station he was listening to would agree with the priest. While the Satanic Panic was long over, the church had a tendency to hold onto grudges, so John drove in silence. But now that he was alone, he found silence unbearably boring. So, he flicked the radio on and let the sweet sounds of Toto wash over him as he hummed along, mangling the lyrics to "Hold the Line" in his head.

He tapped along to the radio on the car door with amateur percussion skills, his arm resting out the window, and tried to remember the last time he'd been to church. It had been a long time ago, when he was still a boxer and when he was still married.

"Forgive me father, for I have sinned," John muttered to himself in a poor Irish accent, trying to coax the memories out with funny voices. Surprisingly, it worked.

He'd gone to church the day he got the divorce papers. Not for any religious reasons. While he'd been raised Catholic, he'd left the church before he started boxing. So, no, he hadn't been there to pray, but because he was looking for a place to hide from the rain. He remembered taking off his gloves, dazed, and unwrapping his hands before pulling a shirt on, stumbling out of the gym, flecks of blood on his shoes, and wandering for a while until it began to rain. The church had been nearly empty, but it had provided a shelter for John to wait out the storm.

Then, he got home, and his wife had left divorce papers on the kitchen counter. Except she hadn't left out a pen to sign them with. He'd had to root around in the drawers to find a pen. Go figure.

John grimaced and tried to think of some happier memories. Some came to mind, but none seemed to quite stick, so instead, he leaned out the car to see if he could see

Father Kominsky. While John appreciated the money he was making letting the meter run, he was getting bored. In a window a few floors up, John saw Father Kominsky's silhouette, clutching a bible and holding a cross. Maybe he was doing a baptism. Did priests do house call baptisms? And did they need a bible and cross? John wasn't sure, he'd been awful young when he was baptized and didn't really remember the whole event. And he hadn't paid much attention to any subsequent baptisms he'd seen either. He knew there was some water involved, but not much else. No wonder he was a lapsed Catholic. What was he wondering about? Oh yeah, the padre.

John leaned out of the car a bit further and took another look at the window. Father Kominsky was gone from it and instead he saw a woman's silhouette. It looked like she was screaming something. John wondered what she was so worked up about. People got really excited for baptisms and stuff, didn't they? Fainted in the church pew and all that, oh Johnny, go fan your auntie. He figured if he turned down the radio and listened really hard, he'd be able to hear her, but he didn't really care enough. And hey, "Rich Girl" was coming on. He loved that song!

Upstairs, in the apartment, the demon was ripping its way into reality, quickly taking on a physical form. As a body congealed out of black smoke, Father Kominsky screamed in Latin and tried to walk forward, but the sheer force of the manifestation stopped him. He'd gotten it out of the girl, who lay unconscious, but the demon had been more powerful than he'd thought, and he wasn't strong enough to banish it completely. The Father was afraid.

Downstairs, John made his best impression of a harmonica, which was, by all accounts, one of the worst impressions of a harmonica done by anyone, ever. John had a friend once, another boxer, who played the harmonica. They'd gone up against each other in a match and John had nearly killed him with a poorly placed punch thrown just a bit too hard.

As he finished his harmonica solo, the demon broke free, its physical form releasing a shockwave of pure evil that knocked Father Kominsky from his feet. John felt a shake and looked around. Was it an earthquake? Well, whatever it was, he thought, it was over. So, it couldn't have been that bad. John liked things more when they were over. That's why, he figured, he didn't fight the divorce. Urgh.

Trying to shake bad thoughts, he got out of the car to stretch his legs. He used to run a few miles every morning. It had been years since he'd done that. He started to shadow-box.

The demon shoved its way past Father Kominsky, its pale skin bubbling and burning where the holy rays shining from Father Kominsky's cross hit it. It howled, deep and guttural, like the sounds black holes make, and ran out of the apartment, crashing through a wall on the way to the staircase. Father Kominsky, struggling to his feet, yelled, "It must not be allowed to escape!"

John was practicing some punches in the street, the feel of boxing slowly coming back to him. At first, he was just shadowboxing, but he began to get into it. Left jab, right, duck, uppercut. Soon, he could feel his heart pounding with adrenaline as he fought an imaginary foe. He closed his eyes and streetlights turned into stadium lights and the quiet echo of the city at night turned into a roaring crowd. In his head, he was David facing a man the size of Goliath and beating him hand over fist. Turning to deliver a straight punch to the imaginary boxer behind him, John felt his fist connect with actual, real flesh and yelped.

The punch threw the demon across the street and hit its head hard on the pavement. John hadn't boxed in years, but his punches were still as heavy as a sledgehammer. Plus, unbeknownst to him, in that moment, John had faith in his fists, in himself, and faith of any kind is toxin to demons. He'd had more faith than he'd had in nearly a decade.

But John wasn't celebrating his newfound confidence.

John was staring at the still corpse of what he thought was some random guy and slowly got back into the cab, sweating buckets. His mind raced. For all he knew, he'd just killed a guy. His fingers wrapped around the steering wheel tight enough to dig into the foam. Oh god. He'd killed a man with one punch. Maybe the guy was alive? John didn't want to check. The man might've broken his neck on the pavement. He should go and check. John glanced towards the body, which remained still. It was too dark to tell, but John figured it was just some drunk who got too close to him. It wasn't his fault, right? He'd just been punching air and then the guy had got in the way of his punches. Yeah, that was it. He was completely blameless here. Was the body moving? Was it alive?

Then, Father Kominsky burst through the entryway and ran in front of the car, cross in hand, screaming in Latin. John jumped out of his skin and sunk lower into his seat and cranked the music even louder. Then, for a finishing touch, he put his hat over his eyes and pretended to be asleep. Perfect, no one would suspect a thing. There weren't any fingerprints on your knuckles, after all.

He heard some noises, some screaming, and saw some flashing lights. He stayed down and continued to pretend to be asleep. Half an hour later Father Kominsky, looking far worse for wear and smelling a bit of sulfur, stepped into the cab and asked John to take him back to St. Andrews. John did so and decided not to ask any questions, and hoped the Father wouldn't either.

Both men breathed a sigh of relief. It was over, for now.

POETRY BY SAVANNAH S. MILLER  
**CEREAL DATER**

I left Cheerios for Froot Loops today  
It just wasn't working out  
After Lucky Charmed his way into my bed  
And K proved to be anything but Special  
I don't trust any man who says he's good for my heart  
I'm so tired of being alone  
Sad from Corn Pops with bad jokes  
And Apple Jackasses who yell  
And Frosted Flakes who never show up on time  
It's days like this I remember  
The man who hit me up just for Kix  
And left thinking he knew me  
Or the Cinnamon Crunch that got toasted  
And forgot my birthday  
Rice Krispy who snapped, crackled,  
And popped off on me  
His gender norms from the Golden Graham age  
I've dealt with so many flavors of Wheaties  
That ultimately all taste the same  
I Krave a real love that's constant  
One who knows my All Bran and loves it still  
Even when I become soggy Grape Nuts  
We'll split all the Chex at the restaurant  
He'll call me his Honey Bunch and smile  
And we'll be equal partners in this thing called Life

Maybe it'll work out this time  
But if not I'll just drown in a bowl of milk

DRAMA BY CURTIS MOORE

**BEHAVIORAL SCIENCE:**

*CASE STUDIES ON THE EFFECT OF PERSPECTIVE-SHIFTING STIMULI IN HUMAN ENVIRONMENTS*

**CHARACTERS**

**WARICK:** The head lecturer at a university for demons.

**FAUST:** An adjunct professor and WARICK'S helper.

**NERIUM:** The Dean of the University.

**PROSECUTOR:** An attorney.

**CUSTOMER:** Brings a broken watch in to be fixed.

**WATCHMAKER:** Fixes CUSTOMER'S watch.

**MAN:** Gets home from work to take his dog for a walk.

**JOHNSON:** MAN'S neighbor.

**SYNOPSIS**

**WARICK** presents his invention, a glass that amplifies the bad things in the world to his colleagues. Dean **NERIUM** is skeptical at first, so **WARICK** discusses his case studies with the help of the adjunct professor **FAUST**. The first shows it working to make a **PROSECUTOR** ignore mitigating circumstances in a case he must provide a recommendation for. The second shows a **CUSTOMER** become immediately dissatisfied with a watch he has loved for a decade. And the third shows a generally contented man come to hate himself after just a few glimpses of his reflection.

*(SCENE: Lectern, with several seated faculty members.  
Behind the lectern is an easel covered by a dark sheet.)*

**WARICK:** Welcome, my esteemed colleagues, to my demonstration. I, of course, am Professor Warick, Head Lecturer, Dean of Demonic Engineering, and faculty advisor to the Mathletes. I have invited each of you here today to show you the progress on my latest invention.

*(He removes the sheet, revealing a pane of glass.)*

**WARICK:** I have invented a glass that shows its user the worst possible image of anything they should view through it. Its revolutionary technology minimizes anything the user considers good, fair, or true, and magnifies the darkness, the injustice, the ignobility of the world. With this glass I could make a parent's own children seem to them like the worst of these despicable hobgoblins in our audience tonight.

*(Several hands go up.)*

**WARICK:** There will be time for questions, I promise. First, let me answer what I'm sure several people are waiting to ask: What proof do I have that this invention works? Well never fear, because I have case studies!

*(NERIUM rises.)*

**NERIUM:** Professor Warick, before you present your case studies I wonder if you would just give us a short explanation of the way this glass works? I think that would help us analyze the data you're presenting.

**WARICK:** Dean Nerium, I really think my case studies will speak for themselves.

**NERIUM:** I'm sure they will, but it might save us some time if we have an idea of the principles at play first.

*(WARICK paces, then shrugs and turns back to the audience.)*

**WARICK:** My colleague is right, of course. I will try to keep this short, despite the complicated physics at play here. I will need a hand, though. Faust, I see you lurking there in the back. Would you be so kind as to hold this glass for me?

*(FAUST approaches the easel and picks up the glass.)*

**WARICK:** Thank you. Academia of course could not function without its adjunct faculty. Now, I took my inspiration for this invention from your standard human mirror. As any of you who have spent time in the field will know, humans and parakeets love mirrors, which can be used to enrich their environments. Some humans even create rudimentary prototypes of this glass in their funhouses, using concave and convex backings to distort their reflections to become even more grotesque. This glass uses the same idea, only in addition to distorting the physical world, it can also distort the intangible things the mind perceives when it views the world. Faust, please look through the glass and tell me what you see.

*(FAUST raises the glass and looks at WARICK.)*

**FAUST:** I see the foulest, ugliest, most dishonest, weaselly . . .

**WARICK:** Please, flattery isn't necessary here. Point it out there, and tell me what you see.

*(FAUST points the glass at the audience and gasps.)*

**FAUST:** They're terrible. I've never seen such a collection of awful, despicable . . .

**NERIUM:** Honestly, Warick, this makes me question how it works even more. It seems to improve the way Faust sees things. I think most of our audience is morally dubious, at best. To call them despicable is higher praise than many of them deserve. So it can hardly be said to make things universally worse for the viewer.

**WARICK:** Faust's point of view isn't the point of view I'm trying to distort. Our goal is the putrefaction of mankind, not to probe adjunct faculty's imagination. If you'll remember, I had some case studies on our actual target population I was

going to present before I was interrupted.

**NERIUM:** I just think there are a lot of unanswered questions here, and what I'm seeing is a sales pitch.

**WARICK:** You haven't seen anything, because you keep interrupting. What you call a sales pitch is actually just an engaging presentation. You should try giving one. Faust, hold the glass up so the audience can see what's on it.

**NERIUM:** The glass records information as well?

**WARICK:** Of course it does. What doesn't nowadays? You'll remember when our colleague invented that little bit of technology almost twenty years ago. Faust, hold the thing up now.

*(FAUST holds the glass up near the end of the stage.)*

*(A PROSECUTOR enters, holding a case file.)*

**PROSECUTOR:** I hate hard cases like this. What sentence do I recommend? Is this defendant a bad person? Unlucky? Just criminally stupid? Where do I even start? He's got a couple charges from ten years ago. Petit larceny. That's not good. Passing a bad check. Still not the best. Now he's in on, what? Opioid possession. He's probably been addicted for years. Yep, there it is in his pre-sentencing report. So what do I do with him? Prison isn't going to help him. It'll just put him further behind. But he clearly can't be out on his own. I need to go over this thing more closely.

*(PROSECUTOR freezes.)*

**WARICK:** This prosecutor just got new glasses from the eye doctor. My assistant got a few minutes alone with the lens grinder, and was able to swap out his regular prescription with lenses made from our new glass.

*(FAUST replaces the glasses as WARICK speaks.)*

**PROSECUTOR:** Where are my glasses?

**FAUST:** *(Whispering)* They're in your pocket!

*(PROSECUTOR puts the glasses on.)*

**PROSECUTOR:** Ah. That's better. Now, let's see. Yes, this makes more sense. These early charges are from when he was nineteen. He's been on this path for years. And petit larceny too. This is just what he's been convicted of anyway, he's probably gotten away with plenty. It's a wonder he hasn't been caught more often.

*(PROSECUTOR freezes.)*

**WARICK:** As you can see, his perspective is immediately shifted when he puts on the glasses. Where he was conflicted as to how best to argue for a just outcome, now he's seeing only the worst parts of this defendant who, all things considered, doesn't pose any real public threat.

**PROSECUTOR:** We definitely can't have this person out on the streets. His behavior is escalating. If I argue for the maximum sentence it'll deter anyone else who finds themselves on this path.

*(PROSECUTOR exits.)*

**WARICK:** The results were immediate and dramatic. In just moments this glass took an educated, powerful person from a place of prating indecision to righteous conviction. Do you have any questions about those results, Dean Nerium?

**NERIUM:** I do appreciate those results, Professor. But, if I may point out something that is, perhaps, obvious, the legal system is the easiest human institution to corrupt. It's long

been a training ground for our newest, and least capable, demons. These results could have been achieved with less effort by a timely Night Court rerun.

**WARICK:** As a tenured professor with some expertise in the manipulation of various justice systems over the last fifteen hundred years, it has not escaped my notice that it is “low-hanging fruit.” However, this was my first experiment, and it serves as proof of concept. Night Court reruns may have been cheaper and more effective, but it was still an important step forward in my research.

**NERIUM:** I hope your next case study is more impressive than getting one attorney to make a stupid argument.

**WARICK:** I’ll skip the part where the glass made the lady at the DMV impatient and unhelpful then.

**NERIUM:** That was not . . .

**WARICK:** Of course it wasn’t. The first case study only proved the glass could shift a person’s perspective on a stranger. I needed to increase the difficulty by bringing it closer to the subject’s heart. Faust, if you would raise the glass again?

*(FAUST holds the glass up.)*

*(CUSTOMER enters, holding an old pocket watch up to the WATCHMAKER, who enters from the other side.)*

**CUSTOMER:** The watch glass is broken on my favorite watch again. I was hoping you could fix it.

**WATCHMAKER:** Again?

**CUSTOMER:** I use it every day.

**WATCHMAKER:** Not to try and talk you out of it, but

there are more practical options that would probably keep time better.

**CUSTOMER:** I like this one. I bought it almost ten years ago and it's been through a lot with me. I know I have to wind it twice a day, but those little moments allow me to take a breath and deliberately think for a few seconds, you know? Like, I get to just focus on those little clicks and not think about everything else that's gone wrong that day.

**WATCHMAKER:** Bring it here and let me see what I can do.

*(CUSTOMER hands over the watch,  
and they both freeze.)*

**WARICK:** At this point, my assistant was able to swap the watchmaker's glass with our own product. I think you'll find the results staggering.

*(FAUST replaces the watch.)*

*(WATCHMAKER fiddles with the watch, then returns it.)*

**WATCHMAKER:** There you are. Good as new.

**CUSTOMER:** Thank you. You know, it's funny. I never noticed these scratches on the face before. This glass must be really clear.

**WATCHMAKER:** I try to buy the best materials.

**CUSTOMER:** I think the hour hand must be causing them. Look, it's worn away about half the numbers.

**WATCHMAKER:** That can happen.

**CUSTOMER:** It's noisier than it used to be, too.

*(CUSTOMER shakes the watch.)*

**CUSTOMER:** Do you hear that? It's really loud. I'm surprised I can sleep with this thing in my room.

**WATCHMAKER:** Well, you've been doing it for a decade. I imagine it's comforting by now.

**CUSTOMER:** And I've never been able to get the date to work right on it. It's almost ten days behind now.

**WATCHMAKER:** I can take a look . . .

**CUSTOMER:** And the crown is really loose. No wonder it loses so much time. I need to check my phone against it every few hours.

**WATCHMAKER:** It may just need to be rebuilt.

**CUSTOMER:** No, no. You were right the first time. I should throw this piece of junk away and get myself a new one. Do you have a garbage can back there?

*(WATCHMAKER and CUSTOMER exit.)*

**WARICK:** In this case, the glass was able to immediately diminish all the sentimental value that person had in one of their favorite possessions and turn it immediately into something they were willing to throw away. Marvelous, just marvelous.

**NERIUM:** It was quick, but it was a piece of obsolete technology. Having a human replace an old watch isn't particularly stunning, is it?

**WARICK:** They had owned the watch for over a decade. It lasted longer than three of their relationships, and two of their couches. Seven American Presidents have been in of-

fice since the original manufacture of that watch. It outlived Elizabeth the Second.

**NERIUM:** Did you want the watch?

*(WARICK pulls a watch from his pocket and checks the time.)*

**WARICK:** I did secure the watch for research purposes. But I disclosed that in my research report, and it didn't affect my judgment.

**NERIUM:** My concern with this invention is that it only adds a step in processes that are already fairly well-established. I don't know that it makes these projects more efficient, and I don't see that it cuts down on necessary demonstration hours.

**WARICK:** I have one more demonstration ready that, I think, you will find does all those things. Now, we all agree that our priority is to inflict as much pain and discontent, as much strife and division as possible, right?

**NERIUM:** That is part of our mission statement.

**WARICK:** And who, according to our data, are the people most likely to cause those kinds of problems.

**NERIUM:** You already covered lawyers.

**WARICK:** A larger group. I'm talking about people with a deep-seated hatred of themselves. Yes, that includes lawyers, but I'm thinking bigger. People from all walks of life who are so unhappy with themselves they are incapable of even the smallest acts of self-love, much less acts of love towards anyone else.

**NERIUM:** We already publish several lifestyle magazines.

**WARICK:** Yes, but this will work for everyone. Faust, hold the glass up one more time.

*(FAUST raises the glass.)*

*(A MAN enters, taking off a work uniform.)*

**MAN:** Another full day's work for another full day's pay.

*(A dog barks offstage.)*

**MAN:** We'll go for a walk, just give me a minute.

*(MAN pulls on a coat and freezes.)*

**WARICK:** This time, we replaced this man's hallway mirror with our new glass. He doesn't spend much time looking into it, but just observe what a few brief glimpses of himself in our new mirror do to him.

*(MAN unfreezes and finishes changing, then glances at the mirror.)*

**MAN:** Good God. This job isn't doing me any favors, is it? If I keep this up I'm not going to make it to the next census, am I?

*(Dog barks offstage.)*

**MAN:** I'm coming. Hold on, where's your leash?

*(MAN looks for the leash, then glances in the mirror again.)*

**MAN:** This apartment is such a shithole. Look at the cracks in the drywall. I can practically hear Johnson chewing next door.

*(Dog barks again.)*

**MAN:** Well, it's not like you're any help. Between food and pet rent I'm not saving money to move any place better.

*(Dog barks again.)*

**MAN:** Don't forget about the vet bills. Your run-in with the porcupine cost me over a grand last year.

*(Dog barks again.)*

**MAN:** I'm looking for it! God-damn.

*(MAN trips over a guitar.)*

**MAN:** I haven't played that in months. Why is that there?

*(MAN holds up guitar and looks at it in the mirror, then strums a chord.)*

**MAN:** Not that I was ever any good at playing it anyway.

*(Dog barks again.)*

**MAN:** Shut up! SHUT UP! I just need a few god-damned minutes when I get home. SHUT UP!

*(A neighbor pounds on the wall. MAN throws a shoe at the dog and there's a yelp.)*

**MAN:** I said SHUT UP!

**NEIGHBOR:** What's going on over there?

*(MAN takes a long look in the mirror and sinks down to sit on the ground.)*

**MAN:** Damn it, what am I doing? What the hell is wrong with me?

*(MAN buries his head in his hands, then looks at the mirror again.)*

**MAN:** Look at you. Your job sucks, your apartment sucks, you haven't called your mother in weeks.

**WARICK and MAN:** *(in unison)* Even your dog hates you now. The world would be better off if you weren't in it.

*(Dog barks and the neighbor bangs on the wall again.)*

*(MAN stands up and holds the guitar like a bat.)*

**MAN:** You know what, Johnson? I'm coming over there and we're going to sort this out.

*(MAN exits.)*

**WARICK:** As you can see, in just a short time with this mirror, an otherwise content man managed to alienate himself from his home, his hobbies, and his neighbor.

**NERIUM:** What about the dog?

**WARICK:** Oh the dog is fine, and actually still loves him. That just makes him feel worse because now he knows he doesn't deserve it. Faust, you may put the glass down.

*(WARICK turns to the audience.)*

**WARICK:** Are there any questions?

*(Silence.)*

**NERIUM:** Despite my initial skepticism, it seems like your

invention works. Write up the rest of your report and turn it into my office please, and we will see about getting you more resources to get more of these deployed.

**FAUST:** We still haven't solved the problem of exactly how it works. If it makes things look worse to humans, but better to us, how can we really classify what it does?

**NERIUM:** That's more of a philosophical question, Faust, which is for another department. Here in Demonic Engineering, our only concern is that the thing works.

**FAUST:** But earlier you said . . .

**NERIUM:** Earlier I was concerned about its effectiveness since it didn't work universally. Now that I'm satisfied it will achieve our ends, I don't have any objections. Do you have any objections, Adjunct Professor Faust?

**NERIUM:** If not, then I ask that we all give a round of applause to Professor Warick, whose efforts will no doubt increase both the effectiveness of our departments, and the stature of our university.

*(They applaud and exit.)*

POETRY BY M.S. BLUES  
**HUNGRY JACK**

jack is a  
    hungry man.  
a poor fellow –  
    he's starving.

when a good samaritan  
    finally does give him  
    a *bite* to eat,  
he devours it, ravenously.

you feel sorry for  
    the fellow, sure you do –

    because it makes you realize,  
food is no longer a necessity,  
    it's a privilege  
for those that can afford it.

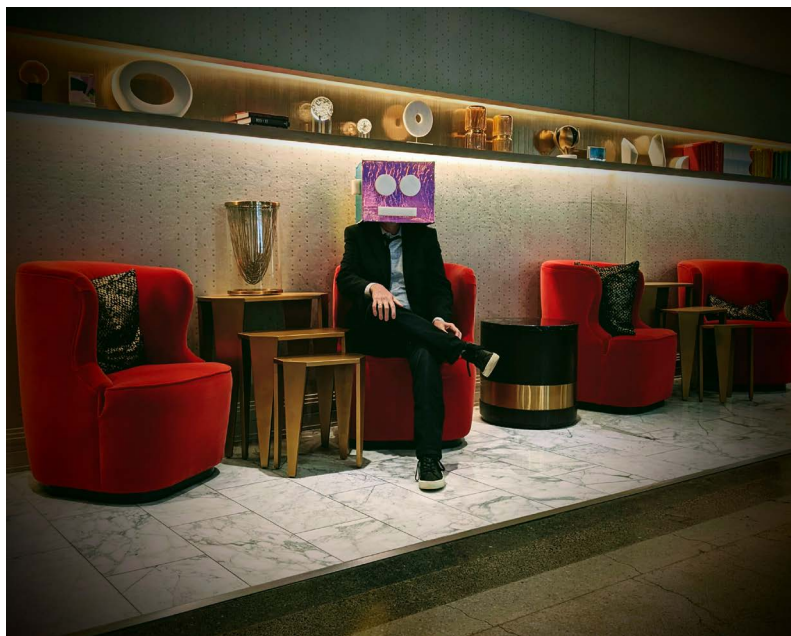
ARTWORK BY RACHEL SINGEL  
**BAT**



*Intaglio on Handmade Oriental Bittersweet and Abaca Paper*  
*11 x 17 inches*  
*2024*

Rachel Singel

PHOTOGRAPHY BY FUTURE FOCUS PHOTOGRAPHY  
**R.R.R.**



*Tulsa Club Hotel, Oklahoma*  
*@future\_focus\_photography*

ARTWORK BY PAZ WINSHEIN  
**BETWEEN TWO WORLDS**



*Acrylic on Canvas*  
*40" x 50"*

Paz Winshtein

ARTWORK BY TIA PENNELLS  
**BARBED WIRE**



POETRY BY TRAVIS STEPHENS

## GEOLOGY, PALEONTOLOGY, AND GARDENING TIPS

I am picking rocks out of  
my lawn, the stones which have  
trotted down the slope, clambered  
over the retaining wall & slid home.  
Safe. Until the lawnmower or  
a stub toe or my simian fingers.  
Underarm them, overhand them,  
despite the signs from the catcher.  
third base or Derek Jeter, the rocks  
end up in the neighbor's hedge. Out.

One stone, the size of a fist, had  
striations in it, layers of hard choices.  
A geologist would label it igneous,  
Paleozoic, gaseous or whatever.  
I myself would estimate it was from  
the Nordstrom Era, when the customer  
was always right. That is an epoch  
preceding the better known Amazonian  
Period, that of lush, overcrowded  
tropical zones beset by lost packages.  
Dark gray delivery vans are a living  
fossil from those times.

In a few billion years from now  
my lawn will have been compressed,  
buried and converted to either a band  
of coal or a crabgrass forest. Tiny  
mammals and hard-spined insects  
the size of nightmares will roam the Earth.

Today, don't wait for evolution,  
grab a handful of weed, some rolling  
stones. Make a tool. Make a fire.  
Most of all,  
make it back for lunch.

POETRY BY EMMA FLOREZ  
**TALE OF THE GODDESS OF GRAFFITI**

My body is a temple, and it's covered in graffiti.

*Lazy* shimmers red across my hands  
*Conniption fit* winds around my neck  
*Shame* covers my breasts with its inky fingers.

Scars map my life.  
Red blotches cover my windpipe, damage from one too many  
panic attacks or pipe puffs.

I adorn myself with graffiti.  
I become a museum to all I've survived.  
Every wound is an offering, and though I'd  
rather have Abel's gift of kindness than Cain's abuse,

I am the god of this body.

I transmute hatred to love,  
scars to art,  
graffiti to holy hieroglyph.

FICTION BY MEHUL MALIK  
**WE'RE FREE TO ROAM**

First, the beds are moved out. Then the tables. Chairs follow. Everything smaller goes after. The walls are stripped of faces fit in frames. Did the walls cry or were they happy now, rid of the burden of love. The cupboard fell twice when they moved it. Maybe it wanted to stay. Maybe one more day? The stove is extinguished. It gave up before the others. The balcony still holds all the sunlight in the world. But now it warms empty floors, not plants and hands. In some timeline, this place was briefly mine.

This is how a home becomes a house.

First, the beds are moved out.

POETRY BY MIKE ISLAS  
**MEMENTO MORI**

i'm trying to be positive.  
i made a list of reasons to stay alive.  
my first reason was waffles.  
today, the waffles at Brown are fluffy, instead of the skinny ones.  
*this is going to be the best week of college yet.*  
*or maybe of my life. just look at how fluffy these waffles are.*

i wonder if the bird i walked over this morning ever thought  
*what if this was the last time i ever flew?*  
before they left their nest.  
did they ever consider how their intestines would decorate the  
sidewalk square?  
some part of me wanted to look up,  
find which window pane shared the same stains as the sidewalk.  
where the sky ended.  
i decided not to.

POETRY BY JEANNE PAULINO  
**THE EQUATION**

Three  
As in  
One in three women  
Will be  
Sexually assaulted.

Three  
As in  
Three fingers  
Plunging in and out  
Of me.

What happened to me was  
Statistics  
Ordinary  
Inevitable.

What he did to me was  
Abhorrent  
Debasing  
Unnatural.

But he  
Was removed from the equation.  
He did not  
Rape  
Me.

I was raped.

I hated math in school, but here's a proof.

Given: Rape  $\neq$  his fault.

Prove: Rape = my vagina - my humanity.

| Statements                                    | Reasons   |
|---|---|
| 1. Rape $\neq$ his fault.                     | 1. Given.   |
| 2. Rape $\neq$ his doing.                     | 2. Alcohol + drugs + he's a feminist + I texted him first.                                    |
| 3. Rape = I am just my body = I am not human. | 3. My vagina was out + I was drunk.   |
| 4. Rape = my vagina - my humanity.            | 4. Rape $\neq$ his fault, Rape $\neq$ his doing. = Rape = I am just my body = I am not human. |

I am just a number.

I am just the part

That was violated.

Not the part *he* violated —

No.

It wasn't his fault.

It's unfortunate that

Drugs and alcohol were involved.

He's having a really

Hard time.

— that's what I was told by our friends.

Was it rape,

Anyway?

My vagina + his fingers - his penis = rape?????

When he extracted his fingers from my

Cavities,

He also took

My sanity.

But none of this  
Was due to him.  
Apparently,  
My brokenness is  
All that I am.  
And who'd want to hold something  
That's already defunct?  
A shattered cup in the palm of  
Your hand.

Let's solve some inequalities.  
Discomfort > safety.

His "*I don't remember what happened I was so fucked up*"  
And her "*I'm sorry you feel this way,*  
*But . . .*"  
Took precedent  
Over my ability to  
Sleep  
Eat  
Walk  
Think  
Without fear.

Which is why:  
The pain of losing my friends > the pain of his fingers inside  
Of me.  
Their budding romance > her supposed loyalty and friend-  
Ship.

Rape is formulaic.  
It's mechanical.

Chemists seek to understand the behavior of  
Matter.  
In chemical reactions (the transformation of two or more

Substances),  
Inputs (reactants)  
Evolve into  
Outputs (products).

In and out.

Body parts + violence + anger + disgust + suffering → \* body  
Parts, autonomy, hope, creativity,  
Trust.

*\*Some energy is lost to heat.*

Rape is predictable.  
But it's not logical.

There's no logic  
Why  
One  
In  
Three.

But I'm one.  
I'm still in the equation.

I wanted to remove myself  
From the equation  
By any means.  
I wanted:  
My life = back to normal = 21 - the hurt

But it wasn't possible to remove  
The hurt.

So:  
Back to normal = 21 - the hurt - my life.

How could I subtract  
My life  
So that the world would return  
To normal.

22  
As in  
I turned 22.

I didn't have the will  
To remove myself from the equation.  
Because:  
Back to normal + the hurt = 21 - my life.  
I didn't want  
To add  
More hurt.  
Shards of the cup  
Cutting deeper.  
Stuck in your skin.

What I did have  
Was the courage  
To remain.  
To live.  
With the hurt.  
With this life that is not normal.  
But is now  
Mine.

FICTION BY ANDREW PIMENTEL

## DEATH OF THE AUTHOR

You know how the meal will end. You have planned each and every detail of the evening: from the menu and seating arrangements, right down to how you will hold the cup when you give the toast at the dinner's conclusion. What a finale it will make. There are still uncertainties of course. You taste the roux. Does it really need more salt?

*A dish is a carefully curated assemblage of ingredients. Layers of complexity funneled into a single definitive statement. Nothing added is arbitrary and nothing stands alone. Each ingredient is load-bearing; each supports each other in a fine latticework of flavor.* Is this what you spent five years studying architecture and structural engineering for? To explain the most basic elements of cooking with clever metaphor? But you must rehearse your toast. And you must say that an apple is never just an apple.

You ruminate on your words. *Reduce. Reduce. Reduce.* You mutter as you drag your wooden spoon through the roux. Is this what you've been reduced to? His glorified cook? The host of his awards ceremony? Who is this dinner for exactly? *We gather here to celebrate the author.*

The guests will arrive. First the hors d'oeuvres – scallops with avocado toast, endive with miso crab cakes, his family recipe pork and raisin empanadas, and the vegan shiitake xiao long bao that took you a whole week to prepare. There will be an open bar with small talk. Then a game of charades. Questions will eventually follow. *So where is he? Where is the great and powerful Oz?*

*Not yet home.* You will say. The excuse doesn't have to be complicated. They know and you know that he has always been aloof, lost in his plots. He never saw the bigger picture, did he?

And yet here you are, heralding his accomplishments. The voice of someone else's words. Tenderizing him for the audience. Why are you making him taste good?

You will be plating and serving from the rustic Bizen ware that you insisted on dragging back from Japan in your carry-ons. Even going so far as to send your own clothes back home through the post. The only reason you got away with it was because he thought the experience would make a wonderful anecdote to accompany the plates. That was all these dinners ever meant to him. Clever words at the cutting board. Clever words while drinking. Clever words while setting the table. Clever words while eating. Clever words while washing the dishes. And where is he now? With all his clever words?

You knew how this dinner would end. All those years ago when he first told you he loved you. You knew then. Like destiny. Guided by an omnipotent hand, just as you now guide the butter to dissolve into your roux. *Reduce*. You've become quite the reducer over the last few days. Who knew you were so good at butchery?

After the appetizers, the main course will be fairly simple comfort food. Roasted root vegetables with rice and a Japanese-style curry. But nothing is ever simple with you (an apple is never only an apple) right? You brought this curry to the barbecue. You smoked the meat over lapsang souchong tea leaves and almond wood. This isn't just Japanese-style curry; this is a play on the flavors and aromas of Japanese whiskey, and you will make damn sure when they taste it they know just how clever you are.

After the smoky richness of the curry, you will serve an asian pear sorbet to cleanse the palate. The eighteen-year-old Hakushu (his favorite bottle) lies in wait as the digestif. It will be your *pièce de résistance*: the final layer of complexity of your meal, and where you will make the celebratory toast. You will stand at the head of the table, the audience in front of you, with your cup of his favorite whiskey raised above their heads. As you look out across the table you will say: *To*

*the author I offer my love and support, and to you – colleagues, friends, and critics – I offer this load-bearing meal. Just as I have nourished you, so have you nourished us with your clever words.*

*But where is he? They will stammer. How can we celebrate? How can the dinner be over?*

You know the answer, but you won't speak it just yet.  
You will savor the moment.

POETRY BY WILLIAM WEISS  
**GREYSCALE**

The color before blue  
Not everything has meaning like it used to  
Point out the charm of my favorite artists

Eyes too small for a face  
They have shrunk  
Let my world build plaque on the gums

Like a first word, I'll go out with a gargle  
False hope of holy water  
Fluid in my lungs  
Undrying a worm in the sun

A weather vane still turns when no one's home  
When no one tends to the garden  
The birds still bathe in dirty water

And dogs still smile at the rainbow in greyscale

POETRY BY TYLER ROBERT SHELDON  
**TRUE HAPPINESS MUST ALSO MEAN THIS**

I wish to be full  
with regret in the way  
that the one you love

pats their stomach  
after the tonkatsu  
or spaghetti you made them

is gone, and they say  
they'll never eat again,  
and all the while the world

's most perfect dessert  
waits for them in the kitchen,  
impossible now as the moon.

POETRY BY ERIC ELLIS  
**FAULTY WIRING**

When the Lord says, “Let there be light,” it takes a minute.  
It takes several minutes. A loud pop  
from somewhere in the back room. *Shoot.*  
*Circuit breaker.* It’s not like the Lord is afraid

of the dark or anything, you know; the Lord is still  
getting used to the newly-created universe —  
the endless oblivion of before, haphazard  
and all over. Hey, I’m not judging, Lord,

but I’ve got a burning question:  
Who stands at the top of the stairs  
waiting as you yell, “How about now?”

Who do you call out to?



THE  
ALICE  
FRASER  
COLLECTION

ARTWORK BY ALICE FRASER  
**A PLACE**



22" x 32" x 20"  
*Ceramics, Acrylic Paint, Wood, Paper, Glaze, Underglaze*

ARTWORK BY ALICE FRASER  
**A PLACE**



*22" x 32" x 20"*  
*Ceramics, Acrylic Paint, Wood, Paper, Glaze, Underglaze*

ARTWORK BY ALICE FRASER  
**A PLACE**



## FLORENCE

Everyday had become the same. Kyle would wake up sometime after sunrise. Watch TV for a few hours. Stare out the windows at the neighbors for a while. Eat a meal or two — toast and cereal were his specialties. Then he would go to bed sometime after sunset. The biggest dilemma of the day was when to jerk off. In the morning? Or in the evening? Let's be honest though, these days it was quite often both. Nothing out of the ordinary happened anymore. You can throw out your TV guides: life had become predictable.

Now into his second year of working from home, Kyle rarely ventured out of the house. Not even to pick up the newspaper from the pile that had formed on the front lawn. He often wondered where they came from since he had never signed up for delivery. *Who still reads the newspaper, anyway?* Nowhere to go and no one to see, Kyle's life was one of isolation.

Of course he could have always talked to someone on the phone, but who would call him? Most of his family were either dead or had stopped talking to him for one reason or another. Outside of work, friends were not something he made time for. Now with all the time in the world, he regretted not making more of an effort at being affable.

To spice things up, Kyle had lately taken to frequenting chat rooms on the internet. It wasn't long before he grew tired of those as well. People were too into themselves. They complained about anything and everything they could. Or tried to one up one another on how great their lives were. People annoyed him, and Kyle wondered why he thought it would be any different filtered through a faceless medium. Only another affirmation of why he didn't have friends.

One night, before signing out of his preferred chat

room, a message blipped on his screen. A simple message read: Need a friend? and was followed by a link. Kyle couldn't tell who had sent it. There was no name and only a generic icon photo, the one every new member to the group got assigned. Being a Friday night – every night was a Friday night now – Kyle thought, *What the hell, let's see where this rabbit hole goes.*

He clicked the link and was taken to a website for life-size animatronic dolls.

*Curiouser and curiouser.*

Scrolling through the various options, it seemed there was a robot for just about everyone out there. They had different skin colors, hair styles, accessories, skills, and even both or no genitalia. The more Kyle poked around, the more he started to consider ordering one. Why not, he thought. He'd been growing more lonely and could use some extra company around the house. What sold him on the idea was the banner at the top of the website: \$1 down and no interest for one year.

*This is too good to be true!*

Kyle filled out his order form. He would want a woman in her late 30's, crow's feet starting to form around the eyes, short brown hair, cooking and cleaning skills, and no visible tattoos. He chuckled at this last part, though he wasn't sure why. Maybe because of how late it had become. He submitted the form and turned off his computer to go to bed.

\* \* \*

Ten to fourteen business days later, Kyle heard a knock on the door. He opened to find a box, almost as tall as himself, standing on the porch. He struggled to bring the box inside and get it open. With all the packaging out of the way, he stared into the eyes of his new friend. She was exactly as he described her on the order form. Digging out the instructions from the debris, he activated her through a control panel on her back right above a tasteful tramp stamp. She blinked

and came to life.

“Hello, Kyle,” she said.

He marveled at her crude voice, knowing it would be something he’d get used to in time. He watched her move about the room, taking in her new surroundings. She began to work immediately, picking up clothing Kyle left laying around. She folded it nicely, and set it on the coffee table.

“Don’t mind that right now,” he said.

“Would you like me to make you something to eat, a sandwich perhaps?” She smiled at him.

“Let’s just talk for a while.”

“Okay. What do you wish to discuss?” Her head tilted slightly to the left.

“Tell me about yourself.” Kyle sat on the couch. He patted the cushion next to him. He tracked her shapely form as she moved across the room and took a seat. “Start with your name,” he said.

She became puzzled. “I don’t believe you have given me a name yet.”

“Oh, I didn’t realize I was supposed to name you. Let’s see.” He thought for a moment. “How about Florence? I’ve always liked that name.”

“Would you like to save that in your preferences?” She inquired.

“Preferences?”

“You may access and make changes to your preferences at any time by –”

“Yes, save, please,” he interjected.

“Saved.”

They continued to talk for hours into the night. He would find in the days to come, the more she was exposed to her environment, the more she would adapt and become almost . . . human. For now though, he enjoyed her choppy delivery and straightforward process. In his mind, this might be the best dollar he ever spent.

\* \* \*

Later that night, Kyle struggled falling asleep. He kept checking on Florence standing in the dark corner. Headlights from cars passing by illuminated her face before returning her to the shadows.

"You can come lay in bed with me," he finally threw out. She climbed into bed with him and they both stared at the ceiling together.

After a moment, she asked, "Would you like me to perform fellatio?"

He gulped. "What?"

She disappeared under the covers and he soon caught her meaning. With the act committed, Florence returned to her side of the bed and resumed staring at the ceiling.

"Florence?" He timidly asked.

"Yes, Kyle?"

"You can save that to preferences."

"As you wish."

A wry smile spread across his face. It was official. Definitely the best dollar he ever spent.

\* \* \*

Over the next couple of weeks, many changes took place around the house. Thanks to Florence the house was spick-and-span. The dishes were put away. The laundry done. Kyle replaced the hours he spent watching TV with observing Florence going about her work. As a thank you, he ordered her some new clothes and accessories from the website. He loved her expression of joy whenever she received a present. And thanks to his saved preferences, she was sure to return the gesture with a gift of her own.

Things had been looking up for Kyle since Florence's arrival. He was no longer fraught with loneliness or weighed down by the mundane. He also hadn't anticipated the added bonus that came with a personal assistant. She could leave the house to pick up groceries or anything else he needed. Kyle

had become a home-body, and now he could stay that way forever if he had the mind to.

One day while clearing the pantry of expired food items, a rat bounded out and ran across the floor. When confronted with the information, Kyle told Florence to pick up some rat poison from the store.

“Would you like to save that to your preferences?” She asked. Always after a command the question would be posed to him. Kyle liked the sense of power it gave him. He could run the entire household and not have to lift a finger. With a mere affirmative answer, his wish would be carried out.

\* \* \*

With the change of seasons, the weather forced the mercury down. A chill in the air brought a crisp breeze with the faint smell of rotting leaves. Kyle set Florence to building a cozy fire for him to read by.

“Florence, dear” – he had started calling her dear – “how about some soup for dinner tonight?”

“As you wish.”

Florence was a great cook ever since Kyle sprung for the more advanced culinary skills on his birthday. It was like having a celebrity chef in his very own kitchen. He had never eaten so well in all his life. Yes, she was a great cook, but an exterminator, not so much. A continuing rat infestation still plagued the house.

The rat poison, left out on the counter, got in the way of her making dinner. Florence went to move the box when a pellet fell out and blooped into the simmering pot. She watched it dissolve, mixing completely with the bubbling roux. She became conflicted on how to proceed. This felt like something she should tell Kyle, but he had saved in his preferences that once a task had begun, he didn’t like to be bothered with the fine details. She went on cooking.

Kyle was already waiting at the table when she came

in with a steaming bowl of the contaminated broth. She placed it in front of him. He smiled up at her as she lit the candles in the center of the table and took her seat at the other end. He waited for the soup to cool before digging in. Soon the bowl had been devoured and he asked for seconds.

“Whatever you did differently tonight, save to preferences. This is beyond scrumptious,” he said with glee.

“I think you should know, though –” she tried to say.

“Ah, a magician never reveals their secrets! Neither should you. Now a second bowl if you don’t mind.”

The second bowl disappeared faster than the first, and Kyle retired to the couch to put his feet up, blissfully unaware of the implications his actions had set in motion. Florence retreated to the kitchen to dispose of the remaining tainted meal.

Bound by the ethics encoded in her, she continued to add a little rat poison to each meal she made. Kyle, none the wiser, continued to greedily dine in his oblivious state. Not even after he started showing symptoms from his rapid intake of hazardous pollutants in his food did he come to realize what was really going on. Instead he ordered for more soup to be made, thinking that was all he needed to overcome his fever. Then the stomach aches set in. And the nightly trips to the bathroom. His body felt weaker all the time. He had gotten himself into a vicious cycle and he headed toward the one solution that could get him out of it.

“More soup. I must beat this ailment once and for all,” he struggled to exclaim.

“As you wish,” was the only way Florence knew how to respond.

\* \* \*

More soup was made.  
More poison was added.  
Time was running out.

Kyle walked with a hunched posture from the stomach aches. His pale face had twisted into a grotesque grimace that conveyed every ounce of pain he experienced. He slumped down into a chair while bracing himself to steady his descent into the well-worn cushion. Florence placed a bowl of soup on the table in front of him. Though he no longer had much of an appetite, he did the best he could, managing to get spoonful after spoonful successfully to his mouth.

The muscles in his hand contracted, sending the spoon down in a loud clatter. Soup sprayed onto the nicely ironed tablecloth.

“My heart . . . it’s . . . racing,” he said, his voice almost inaudible. He fell out of the chair into the fetal position on the carpet. His eyes rolled back into his head.

Florence stood above him. She stared down without emotion as he flopped around on the floor. Kyle fought to find her eyes.

“You bitch! What did you do to me?”

The foam that had gathered in his mouth fell in a gentle pitter-patter against the carpet. He reached toward her with a gnarled claw. With one final expulsion of breath, his body went limp.

Florence stood fixed for a moment, waiting to see if he would move again. She grabbed the bowl off the table and took it to the kitchen. Her programming told her there were dirty dishes to be attended to.

POETRY BY HOLLY DAY  
**G-D IS SPYING ON MANKIND**

No matter how well-dressed you are, you will not know the contents of a book  
by balancing it on your head. Nor will trepanning your skull  
allow the wind to carry the knowledge of scattered pages and  
burning bibles  
into any part of your brain that will recognize the ash as  
words.

In the shadows of derelict trains, four old men sit around a  
table in pews  
rescued from abandoned churches. They, too, have tried  
balancing books on their heads for the delight of passersby,  
tried  
learning open-heart surgery and dentistry from medical ency-  
clopedias  
bought at library close-out sales, but perfection eludes

even them and their attempts. The suits you wear have to be  
new.

God can tell if you bought them at a thrift store, or pulled  
them

from the fresh bodies of a recently-dead suicide victim or  
career alcoholic.

If there's anything I've learned about Heaven,  
you have to bathe an awful lot to get in.

POETRY BY MACKENZIE ENTEADO

## PICK UP YOUR LAUNDRY BEFORE I SUFFOCATE YOU WITH YOUR DIRTY UNDERWEAR

I think you like having me more than you like me. I am a warm body sprawled across your bed mimicking the dirty clothes inhabiting your bedroom floor. I am the pretty little thing on your arm, a cheap interpretation of a designer handbag. Your love is crushed by the status you so deeply desire; the time-consuming-all-but-obvious need to be the best. Now take a step forward, into your mouth, and recall your own actions before speaking of others' room to improve. You can't even do your laundry! Let me pick up the pieces of myself that you littered below and tape myself together. For you, I'll glow. I will be the floor you walk on, holding you up. You step on me crying that it's not enough. Pick up your cup and drown your sorrows. I fear that there will be no tomorrow for me. I am a warm body lying exposed across your bed as you slowly but surely beat me to death with your love. I turn cold.

DRAMA BY ROLAND PONCE RUSINEK  
**FOR THE LOVE OF D'ARTAGNAN**

**TIME:** The near future, when modern tech has been somewhat suppressed but still exists. Although there is the illusion of freedom in this world, the government has control in ways the populace doesn't understand or see. Visually feels like the 1970's-80's in an Eastern Block country before the wall came down, but stylish.

**PLACE:** The ground floor outside of a small apartment complex somewhere in the greater Los Angeles area.

**CHARACTERS**

**JOE:** Male presenting. 20s and up. Any race. A writer. Gay/Queer. High strung, desperate, afraid. Maybe a little histrionic. Speaks with great urgency. The cutting of his internet is life or death to him. He's so scared he can't see what's really happening.

**THE WORKMAN:** Male presenting. 20s and up. Any race. Hetero presenting. Calm. Warm. Direct. Compassionate in spite of the fact he must do his unpleasant job. Carries a sadness or heaviness about him.

**NOTE:** This short play was written sometime in the fall of 2017 during the first Trump presidency, and revised in July of 2025 at the start of the second Trump presidency.

**ACT I**

*(At lights up, the WORKMAN is examining a cable connected to a box that runs along the wall next to*

*Joe's ground floor apartment window.)  
(JOE sees the WORKMAN through the window.)*

**JOE:** Hello?

**WORKMAN:** Morning.

**JOE:** Hold on a sec.

*(JOE hurriedly enters from the apartment's front door  
which is adjacent to the window.)*

**JOE:** Can I help you?

**WORKMAN:** Joe Caine? Apartment 1D?

**JOE:** *(Coming in hot)* You're going to cut the internet cable. You are, aren't you? *(Not letting the WORKMAN answer)* Look I know you're just doing your job. I know I'm getting off easy with a disconnect order. I know I could go to jail or worse.

**WORKMAN:** Much worse.

**JOE:** But, please, I beg you. I BEG you. Please don't cut off my internet.

**WORKMAN:** I'm sorry. I have to disconnect it.

**JOE:** No. No you don't. You can just walk away, my friend, and leave my one and only life line intact. I won't tell. No one will ever know. And you'd be doing a good deed.

**WORKMAN:** I'd lose my job, bud.

**JOE:** I hear you. I really do. But you cutting that internet cable is the same as – worse than – me losing my job. It would

be the end of me. My only way to earn any money will be gone. I can't order food. Not to mention have sex. My God! I'd never have sex again! My life will basically be over.

**WORKMAN:** I know how hard it is right now for everyone.

**JOE:** Do you? Do you know what it's been like since – I can't even say his name – took office?

**WORKMAN:** (*Quietly*) I do.

**JOE:** I got beat up, gay bashed basically, the night of those first protests. I wasn't even doing anything. Just walking home with groceries.

**WORKMAN:** Oh Man.

**JOE:** Yeah. Then he signed that executive order.

**WORKMAN:** The Repellent Rights Act.

**JOE:** And people like me lost our basic human rights. Do you know what that's like? Well I'm going to tell you. We can't be seen in public doing anything vaguely 'Repellant.' Public Displays of Affection? That's a crime for us. Caught fraternizing with other verified 'Repellants,' like at a gay bar? That will get you thrown into a detention center. Caught having same-gender sex in a public or commercial establishment? Who knows what'll happen to you, but I sure as hell don't wanna find out.

(*Beat.*)

Jeez, I can't believe I'm telling you all this.

(*Beat.*)

Look, It's not safe out there for me. People have taken sides. The lines are drawn. We have turned on each other.

(*Beat.*)

I lost my teaching job because a student said I 'touched' him.

**WORKMAN:** Did you?

**JOE:** Of course not! Children are sacred. My god. It was his mother. “People like you shouldn’t be in a room alone with children. It’s against God’s law.”

**WORKMAN:** Ok. Look, I was –

**JOE:** The Fifth Amendment? What’s that?! Forget the Fifth in a case like this. It was his word against mine. Well hers. So I quit teaching, I had no choice. That, or go through a very ugly public trial. So, now I have to earn my living airing out all of ‘Old Yam Tits’ dirty little secrets – on a very nasty web site, using the name of a literary musketeer – just to earn a tiny check to pay for this earthquake addled, marijuana scented box of kindling.

**WORKMAN:** Wait, you’re not D’Artagnan Dumas, are you?

**JOE:** Who? I don’t know who that –

*(Beat. Then, defeated.)*

Yes.

**WORKMAN:** *(Quietly thrilled)* I read your stuff every day.

**JOE:** *(Flattered)* Oh. *(Terrified)* Shit. *(Coily Concerned)* You a fan?

*(The WORKMAN just looks at him, smiling enigmatically. Joe redoubles his efforts when he gets no response.)*

**JOE:** I won’t let the ‘Tangerine Tyrant’ get away with making us go back in time or back in the closet or back to the death camps. I know my work isn’t earth shattering, it’s not. It’s gossip, but I have to do something. And it’s how I make money. This internet is the only way I have to do that.

(*Beat.*)

I am terrified to leave my apartment –

**WORKMAN:** I get that.

**JOE:** How can you?! You are a handsome, hetero, male presenting human, who works in a functional blue collar job –

**WORKMAN:** (*Under his breath, kinda*) You think I'm handsome?

**JOE:** – They need you to enact punishment on people like me. Just for telling the truth about 'Mango Mussolini.'

**WORKMAN:** I'm not punishing you, this 'Order to Disconnect' is.

**JOE:** I cannot go to the store because I am afraid that some emboldened, homophobic, Neo-Nazi will finally shoot me, legally, at the Ralph's self-checkout?!

**WORKMAN:** Oh man.

**JOE:** Because that overstuffed-pumpkin- spice-sausage-with-a-colostomy-bag, through yet another executive order, made it so that I can't even legally call him an overstuffed- pumpkin-spice-sausage-with-a- colostomy-bag?! The First Amendment? What's that?!

**WORKMAN:** D'Artagnan Dumas can.

**JOE:** Exactly!

(*Beat.*)

I need you to look in your heart here, friend, and ask yourself if you are on the right side of history.

**WORKMAN:** You're just having your internet license revoked.

**JOE:** Suspended.

**WORKMAN:** (*Checking the Order*) Right, it does say, ‘suspended’ here.

(*Beat.*)

How’d they find you anyway?

(*The WORKMAN gets his pair of wire cutters out of his work belt or toolbox and hands them to Joe.*)

**WORKMAN:** Hold these, please.

(*Joe, terrified, answers haltingly.*)

**JOE:** My IP address.

**WORKMAN:** What’s the charge?

**JOE:** Suspicion of ‘Anti-American’ activity. Suspension pending investigation. They can’t prove I’m D’Artagnan though.

**WORKMAN:** That’s good.

(*Beat.*)

Someone should show you how to spoof your IP address.

**JOE:** Okay.

**WORKMAN:** And you should store your stuff on an encrypted server.

**JOE:** (*Taken aback*) Well, thanks. I’m not sure it matters now.

**WORKMAN:** Hold that thought.

*(The workman finds the cable connection to the adapter box. JOE reluctantly holds the wire cutters out to the WORKMAN.)*

**JOE:** I'm gonna be sick.

*(Beat.)*

Don't do this, please!

**WORKMAN:** *(Pointedly)* Please understand, I have to do my job.

*(The WORKMAN slowly, deliberately, unscrews the cable from the adaptor box.)*

*(JOE watches, confused, the wire cutters still in his hand.)*

**WORKMAN:** The order says . . .

*(The WORKMAN finishes unscrewing the cable and lets it hang. Uncut.)*

**WORKMAN:** Disconnect.

*(Beat.)*

*(The WORKMAN writes something on the work order.)*

**WORKMAN:** *(To JOE)* Initial here, please.

*(JOE, more confused than ever, signs the order. The WORKMAN takes out a scanner or an iPhone and scans a bar code on the order.)*

**WORKMAN:** *(Quietly cheerful)* Order Served. May I have those wire cutters back, please.

*(JOE, flabbergasted, hands the WORKMAN his wire cut-*

*ters. The WORKMAN puts them back in his belt or tool box. The WORKMAN then takes off his work belt and any official looking piece of uniform he may be wearing and sets them on the ground in a neat pile.)*

**JOE:** What are you doing?

**WORKMAN:** It's my lunch break. And I forgot my lunch.

*(The WORKMAN starts reconnecting the cable to the adaptor box.)*

**WORKMAN:** I was trying to say before –

*(Beat.)*

I got shot the night after the election. *(Indicates a scar on his arm)*

**JOE:** *(Shocked.)* Oh. What happened?

**WORKMAN:** Two very drunk Karens, in red ball caps, were celebrating.

**JOE:** Of course they were.

**WORKMAN:** At the Faultline, no less. I smelled them before I saw them. I heard one say something I didn't like and I opened my mouth. One of them pulled a little pistol from her pink handbag.

**JOE:** Oh my God.

**WORKMAN:** I almost died. The doctor at the ER didn't want to treat me.

**JOE:** Because that's how they are with us now.

*(Beat.)*

But you're still here.

**WORKMAN:** Yeah. A great nurse – named Karen, believe it or not – pulled the bullet out, stitched me up, and snuck me a round of antibiotics.

**JOE:** Not all Karens are awful, I guess.

**WORKMAN:** No, I suppose not.

(Beat.)

**JOE:** What did you do? For work I mean.

**WORKMAN:** I was working for the Times then.

**JOE:** (*Darkly*) Oh.

**WORKMAN:** (*Defending himself*) I walked when I realized leadership was selling us out to this administration.

**JOE:** Okay.

**WORKMAN:** I took this job because I was also desperate, Joe. I don't love it. But at least I can do some good from the inside.

(Beat.)

(*The internet cable is now reconnected.*)

**WORKMAN:** And D'Artagnan lives another day.

(*JOE is amazed at the WORKMAN'S kindness.  
He sees the WORKMAN now with new eyes.*)

**JOE:** I don't know what to say.

**WORKMAN:** Say you'll have lunch with me.

**JOE:** Really?

**WORKMAN:** Really.

**JOE:** When?

**WORKMAN:** I just told you it's my lunch break and I forgot my lunch.

**JOE:** Oh! Okay, then yeah, right now, come in. I'll make you something.

*(Beat.)*

**WORKMAN:** Why don't we go out to the diner.

**JOE:** Oh.

*(Beat.)*

I can't.

**WORKMAN:** Sure you can.

*(Beat.)*

**JOE:** But what if –

**WORKMAN:** Safety in numbers, Joe. And there will be pie.

*(Beat.)*

**JOE:** What kind of pie?

**WORKMAN:** Whatever kind you want. On me.

*(The WORKMAN reaches a hand out to Joe.)*

*(Beat.)*

**JOE:** God, it terrifies me.

**WORKMAN:** I get it. But, come anyway.

*(A long beat.)*

*(They look at each other.)*

*(The WORKMAN holds his hand steady.)*

**JOE:** Okay.

*(JOE takes the WORKMAN's hand.)*

**JOE:** Yes.

*(JOE and the WORKMAN face each other, holding hands for a moment. They could kiss, but don't.)*

**WORKMAN:** After we eat, I'll show you how to spoof your IP address.

**JOE:** I'd like that.

*(Beat. Embarrassed.)*

Wait, what's your name?

**WORKMAN:** I'm David.

**JOE:** Hi, David.

**WORKMAN:** Hey, D'Artagnan.

*(DAVID and JOE look at each other for a moment more then exit, holding hands.)*  
*(Blackout.)*

POETRY BY MARTINA REISZ NEWBERRY  
**SADIE'S HAIR**

Sadie says she used to have tresses –  
actual tresses like in romance novels.  
Her natural hair was blonde with brown streaks,  
wavy, too thick for ordinary barrettes.

There were numerous times however  
when she dyed it the colors of graffittied murals  
on the walls of shops in East L.A.  
Smitten by pink, then gobsmacked by blue,

then enticed to try purple – *never green*, she says,  
*never green*, she perceived her hair  
as canvas – a material that held paintings  
and visions and stories.

That was a long time ago.  
It has grown out of colors now.  
Sadie says, *You can't call this hair "tresses."*  
*This hair is no longer thick.*

Sadie says, *I'll not dye it again. Its color is steel;  
the true color of my true heart. This is not  
"come hither" hair. these strands say  
"STAND BACK! A warrior is coming through."*

FICTION BY B. ALEX MILL

## A STORY FEATURING A CENTRAL PROTAGONIST AND MULTIPLE ANCILLARY CHARACTERS, SOME OF WHOM ARE MALE AND SOME OF WHOM ARE FEMALE

Maxim Herbert Grice typically wore pants. Typically, but not exclusively. When the weather was quite warm, he would sometimes wear shorts. And when lying in bed, which is where he slept, he wore neither pants nor shorts – preferring to wear his underwear only. And when bathing he wore neither pants, nor shorts, nor underwear – when bathing, he was usually completely bottomless. However, he never went bottomless in public because it was often too cold and he didn't want people to see his genitals.

This morning, Maxim was wearing pants even though he was sitting alone in his apartment. His apartment was where he slept and where he kept his food and clothes. It was also where he spent most of his time when he wasn't working – for instance, as he wasn't working this morning, he was in his apartment. Because he had a job, he had to leave his apartment regularly to travel to his employer's place of business – he would not have been able to fulfill the requirements of his job while remaining at home. However, he was not required to work every day of the week; and on those days that he was not required to work, he rarely travelled to his office. Instead, in such cases, he would either stay at home, or run a few necessary errands, or meet with friends or family in order to participate in social activities of some sort. On this particular occasion he was sitting in his apartment waiting for a visitor – an individual with whom, on some previous occasion, he had agreed to meet at this particular location on this particular morning.

A knock at the door reminded him of something important. Accordingly, he reached his right hand into his right pants pocket. Because his right pants pocket was empty, and

because the pants he was wearing had both a right pocket and a left pocket, he then reached his left hand into his left pants pocket. Next, he spent approximately three seconds inspecting the chair he had been sitting on with a confused expression on his face; after which he said “dammit” quietly to himself, indicating that he was experiencing at least mild frustration. And then, finally, he answered the door.

“Good morning, Paula,” Maxim said.

“Last week we agreed that, on Saturday at 11:00 a.m., I would borrow your car,” Paula said. “I don’t own a car myself. I ride my bike to work, and I rely on public transit for longer trips, so I’ve never seen the need to buy a car – cars can be quite expensive, both to purchase and to maintain. In an emergency, I could always rent a car, or perhaps a van, should I require a larger vehicle. This afternoon I have to transport an extremely valuable item that I need to keep hidden. It will fit in the trunk of your car, and no one will be able to see it or get at it once it’s in there – the trunk of the car locks automatically when it’s closed. You’ve owned a car for several years, and you’ve let me borrow it in the past, so I was confident you would let me borrow it this weekend, so long as you didn’t need it yourself. Today is Saturday, and it’s just a little after 11:00 a.m., so I’m here to borrow your car, as we agreed.”

Maxim invited Paula inside and she sat down on one of his many pieces of furniture.

“Would you like some tea?” Maxim asked.

“Yes, I would.”

“So would I. I must remember to buy some.”

While Paula remained seated, Maxim began to search his apartment with some urgency. Using his vehicle required a set of keys: two long, narrow metal objects joined by a small metal circle or ring. His car keys were larger than his apartment keys, but they were still small enough that it would be possible to swallow them. Maxim had never swallowed his car keys before and had no desire to do so, but he probably would

under special circumstances – for instance, he might swallow his car keys if someone were to pay him several thousand dollars.

When these keys weren't in the ignition of his car, and they weren't in his right front pants pocket, Maxim would usually place them somewhere in his apartment, such as on a table or in a drawer. But when he checked these locations, he didn't find them. He then searched a number of less likely hiding spots and found precisely what he was expecting. He didn't ask his dog if she knew where his car keys were for two reasons: first, his dog was unlikely to know where he had left his car keys, and second, even if his dog did happen to know where he had left his car keys, she would be unlikely to understand the question.

Maxim sat down opposite Paula and said, "If my car keys are in my pants pocket, where I usually keep them, then I will hand them to you momentarily." But since, as Maxim knew, his keys were not in his pants pocket, he did not hand them to Paula momentarily.

"Have you spoken to your mother recently?" Paula asked.

"My mother died two years ago and I haven't spoken to her since."

"I see that you have a refrigerator," Paula noted.

"Yes, I do," Maxim said. "Whenever I have a food item that will spoil unless it is kept cold, I always store it in the refrigerator."

"Refrigerators are very popular. I don't think I know anyone who doesn't own one."

"I also have several pairs of shoes."

Paula looked at her watch. "In order to pick up the extremely valuable item that I need to use your car to transport today, I will need to leave here at a specific point during the next three hours."

"Unfortunately," Maxim explained, "I am unable to locate my car keys. The keys haven't been destroyed – they

still exist. It's just that I'm not aware of their present location. After the last time I used them to operate my vehicle, I presumably put them down somewhere in my apartment, or perhaps I left them in a coat or jacket pocket. And at that time I might even have attended to where I was putting them or leaving them. But, for whatever reason, between that moment and the present, I failed to retain the relevant information in memory. In fact, it's not unusual for me to forget where I have put my car keys, at least temporarily. I have the same problem with a number of small objects that I use regularly: for instance, my wallet and my phone."

"I know that other people sometimes lose personal items of that sort," Paula said, "but it's not something that has ever happened to me. You see, I have a photographic memory – by which I mean that my memory is as good as a photograph, not that I have a good memory for photographs."

Maxim expressed confidence that the keys would turn up eventually, but he implied that it would be better to stop actively looking for them.

"Have you looked under your bed?" Paula suggested.

"I've never left my keys under my bed, so what good would that do?"

"It's like my eye doctor says when he examines me for syphilis: 'it can't hurt to check.'"

Maxim said something insulting that enraged Paula. She yelled at him for several minutes, using a variety of profane language. Her angry tirade finished with the word "you!"

"I have this recurring dream," Maxim remarked. "I've had it more than once."

Their conversation was interrupted by a knock at the door. While neither Maxim nor Paula were aware of this fact as of yet, there were two individuals on the other side of the door, only one of whom had knocked. The individual who had knocked had done so because he hoped to speak with the

occupant of this particular apartment, and he believed that knocking would cause the individual in question to come to the door. And such turned out to be the case, because Maxim, motivated to discover who had just knocked, had soon opened his door.

“I don’t know either of you,” he said.

“The reason that you don’t know either of us is that you haven’t met either of us before,” one of the individuals Maxim hadn’t met before answered.

“I would invite you in, but, as you can see, there are already two people inside the apartment – so I don’t think anyone else would fit.”

“My last name is ‘Smith,’” the man speaking to Maxim said. “‘Smith’ is spelled S-M-I-T-H. I have a first name as well.”

“And the woman with brown hair standing on your right? What is the nature of your relationship to her?”

“This is Berta. We live in the same apartment.”

“Please describe the car that you own,” Berta interjected.

“It’s red,” Maxim said, “And it has multiple windows.”

“Did you know that while there are many distinct shades of red – crimson, scarlet, and so on – the color blue is not divided into distinct shades?” While she was speaking, Berta reached into her purse, which held a number of different items, and pulled out two long, narrow metal objects joined by a small metal circle or ring – she then handed these to Maxim.

“These are the car keys I’ve been looking for all morning. So, that means that either you found my keys, or you stole them.”

“That’s correct.”

Maxim closed the door and turned to Paula with an expression on his face. “I now know where my keys are, so they are no longer lost,” he said.

ARTWORK BY SOFIA HEINS  
**SUMMER SANDWICH**



ARTWORK BY DONALD PATTEN  
**MASKED MASKS CONFRONTING COVID-19**



*2023*  
*Charcoal on Canvas*  
*30" x 40"*

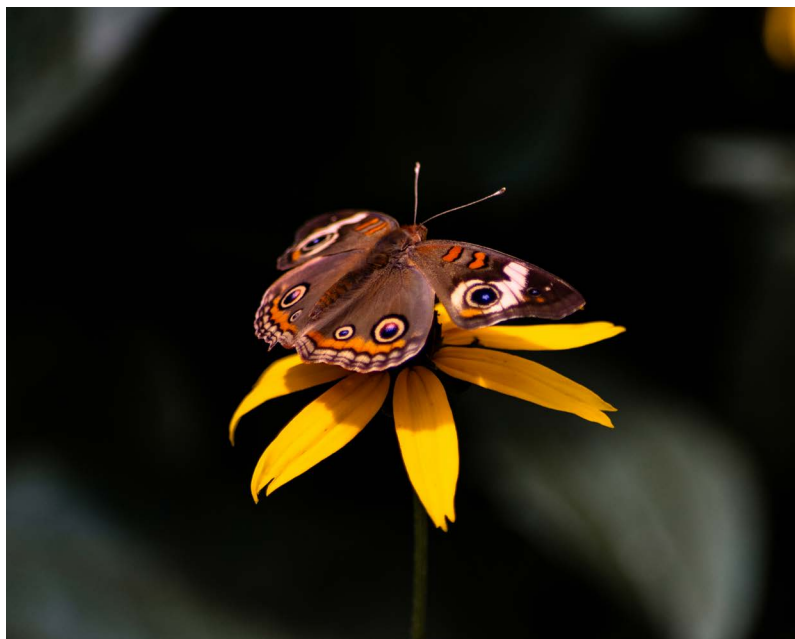
ARTWORK BY MARIE MAGNETIC  
**WHAT FASCINATES THE MASSES**



*Acrylic on Canvas – 2024*

Marie Magnetic (b. 1989, Jackson, Michigan) uses color, form, and surreal images to reflect on the mundane, the morose, and the magnificently mad. Pulling from her experiences, social issues, and current events, Marie's work considers the experiences of being othered. Her art aims to explore humanity and share her strange inner world with her audience. Besides a handful of art classes she has taken at community art centers, Marie is self-taught.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ERIKA PAYNE  
**THE COMMON BUCKEYE'S DEAR FRIEND:  
THE BLACK-EYED SUSAN**



*Photography*

FICTION BY ANGELA JOYNES  
**A PERSIMMON VIRGIN**

Different is no good thing for a twelve-year-old girl in the smallest of towns, no good for Amaretta who craves individuality. Her friends wear cute dresses and stylish girl-cowboy boots to school while Amaretta, to her mother's loathing, wears Wrangler jeans, her brother's western snap shirts, and cotton boxers. The looser and wider Amaretta's knee spread and gait, the Grandeur the Canyon on her mother's brow. Mother begrudges extra expense, begrudges her daughter's weight gain, and full stop begrudges nonconformity. In the grocery store only for Amaretta's sake, Mum occasionally indulges unusual food choices – dragon fruit, lychee, and kumquat. One day Amaretta spies a new fruit. The sticky tag says persimmon. With a coat so glossy and smooth, it just has to be juicy. She takes a good while to make her selection even though Mum huffs and sighs down her neck.

The piece of fruit chosen nestles in Amaretta's palm, bold golden and firm. It's impossible to wait twenty more minutes though, impossible to resist this roiling temptation. Before the checkout counter, Amaretta quickly plucks the persimmon from the cart and takes a bite. Her parotid glands misfire. A shock. The fruit is bitter. It is crunchy. Dryer lint now coats her mouth. Amaretta drops the persimmon, spitting fruity drool on the floor. Mum's face becomes a trophy wall of mortification. "Pick that mess up," she seethes through crowded teeth. "You know we still have to pay." Amaretta is embarrassed by the mess too, but mostly disappointed. She blames herself entirely. Surely this is a persimmon virgin's rookie mistake, choosing flesh unready, unripe.

POETRY BY JOHN GREY  
**GIGGING**

The first time I ran into KD  
he was playing a gig in a bar –  
lots of drinking, loud conversation –  
and there's me,  
the only one giving him an honest hearing.

Between sets,  
I told him how much  
I enjoyed his singing,  
his fingering,  
his runs up and down  
his battered six string.

He said to me  
that an audience of one  
was about as good  
as he could hope for,  
better than most nights in fact.

I dropped a buck in his hat.  
It wasn't empty at least.  
Folks that ignored him,  
must have felt bad,  
dropped some notes  
in his sad looking kitty  
on their way out.

The first time I ran into KD,  
the price for listening  
and the price for not listening  
were just about the same.

According to KD,  
if you love it enough,  
music can't tell the difference.

## TITUS

Titus was dying. She had known this for a while, quite possibly for a few days, but she was not willing to let herself think the thought, not until now. There was no reason for him to be dying. Mules were meant to live for a long time. But it didn't matter what Titus was meant to do, not anymore. He was meant to work but he had not done so for weeks, not since she had taken him away. And now he was dying.

She had taken him just before dawn. There was a chill in the air and the sky was a pale and murky gray. Almost blue, but not quite. Titus was in the stables. He was not asleep, and he was freshly groomed. His mane smelled like rose oil and his muzzle was soft against her palm. Everything was quiet. When she led him out of the stables, through the gardens, and past the sleeping servant by the front gate, he didn't make a fuss. He scarcely made a sound.

Though Titus knew these roads far better than she did, he let her take the lead. In the beginning she tried to mount him, because that was what mules were for, after all. He didn't seem to mind, but she did. She felt too high up. The world spun around her. The road below was an ocean, a rushing current of sand, and it would pull her under if she were to fall.

Thus, for a long time now she had walked beside Titus, her hand resting on his side. The villa was not far from the Aemilian Way, and from there they found Ariminum. Drusus, whom she was meant to marry soon, lived there. It was not Ariminum that she wanted. So they continued by the way of the Flaminia, and they walked. Oh, how they walked, from sunrise to sundown, until her feet screamed from the pain. Sometimes she would take off her sandals and go on until the soles of her feet grew numb. Then she'd put them

back on, and the grains of sand would torment her, scraping between her toes. Titus didn't seem to mind, though. He had nice, thick hooves, and he was meant for walking.

There were the Apennines. Sometimes they went up, up where the air was thin. Sometimes they went through, through narrow passes, through sharp rocks. There was the Ponte d'Augusto, over the Nera, and it was so enormous that she could not bear to look at it, because she felt that it was looking right back at her. There were long nights, neither entirely cold nor entirely warm, with Titus pressed against her back, his head resting at her feet. And there was the straight road that widened and shrunk, widened and shrunk, as if it was breathing.

Soon they would cross the Ponte Milvio. The sun was beginning to set, but if they kept walking for a bit longer than they usually did, they could cross while the moon was out, and find somewhere to sleep inside the city. All that mattered was that they were inside. In Rome.

It couldn't have been more than an hour's walk from where they now stood. Already she could see the Aurelian Walls rising in the distance. But they were not there, not yet, and Titus' breath was heaving, hitching. His head hung limp, and his eyes were not so wide as they usually were. She pulled him along, tugging and tugging, saying "There's not much farther to go. Come on, my darling boy. We're almost there." But Titus did not move any faster. His feet dragged in the sand.

She took him off the road. It was hard going. There were hills and grass that scratched at her legs. Rome shimmered in the distance. The wall stretched on endlessly, and it was curving away from her, calling to her. They came across a stream, a little tributary off of the Tiberis. She cupped her hands and pressed them close to Titus' muzzle. He sniffed at her, tickling her bare wrists (no golden bracelets to cover them now) with his whiskers. He did not drink. He walked past her, his side brushing against her as he went. He approached the

stream and looked down into it. She wondered what he was thinking, if he had any idea what he was looking at, if perhaps he could see his own reflection.

Titus sank down. His legs, so much skinnier than the rest of him, almost spindly, folded underneath him. The mule looked back at the girl, and for him to hold his head up seemed like torture. She sat next to him.

He looked at her. Up, for once, instead of down.

She looked up, too. There were no trees around, nothing blocking her vision, and so the sky seemed to be a massive dome. It towered over her, enclosing everything that had ever been or will be. And it was blazing, exploding. Everything was aflame. Crimson, marigold, amethyst, carnation.

She thought that she would like to paint this sky someday, exactly as it was at that moment. She would burn the sight of it onto her eyelids. She would remember it until she could hold a paintbrush again. She used to paint, before she left. It was the colors she liked the most. The servants were meant to mix them and present them to her on a palette, but she liked to do it herself. She was meant to use a mortar and pestle, but she liked to use her hands. For the reds, she crushed berries with her fingers, and licked the excess off her knuckles. For the whites, she crushed chalk between her palms, ground it to a fine powder. For the greens, she wrung out flower stems, pressing her wrists down and dragging them, dragging them.

Her father told her that this was not the way to do it. She was being incredibly inefficient, and wasting materials while she was at it. Telling, her mother said, that she had the time to laze about, crushing flowers and berries and chalk, instead of doing what she was meant to be doing.

Titus allowed his head to drop, and as he rested his weight on her lap she knew with absolute certainty that he was dying. It did not make sense, but it was true. Maybe he had picked up an illness somewhere on the road. Maybe he was just old.

She wondered what he was thinking of. Perhaps his mother, the mare, who had passed away years ago, but had been a good horse, or it was said. A white horse with a glorious, shiny coat. Or maybe Titus was thinking of his father, the donkey, short and stocky, built to carry heavy loads. He, too, was long gone.

Titus wasn't so stocky, nor was his coat so shiny. His head was heavy. But she didn't mind. She stroked his soft forehead, his muzzle, his ears. There were gray, prickly hairs all around his mouth.

What was a mule, really? He would not have existed if not for humankind. He had a mother and a father, but he could never have children of his own. He was meant to work, and so he did. He was made for it.

But he lived, even when he was not working. He walked beside her, matching her pace, though he could have gone much faster, left her in the dust. He let her sleep pressed against him, and he woke her when the sun came up. He would press his muzzle against her face, and she would sit up laughing. Laughing, yes, laughing, though she hadn't eaten the day before, and was so exhausted she felt she could die. He had soft ears and big, black eyes. What were those for? She didn't know. She didn't know what he was for, and yet she loved him. And now he was dying. They were just outside of Rome and he was dying.

She thought of her own mother, the mare, and her father, the donkey. A union, to be certain, but was it holy? Was it right? Their offspring was meant to be many things, many things that it was not. Such a child, such a mule, was not meant to exist. Could they blame the mule for being distraught? Could they blame it for wanting a sparkling city? For wanting a place with fountains and with statues, where it did not matter what it was, or where it had come from?

How long had it been since the day she'd left? How many moons had risen? And would they recognize her, the mare and the donkey? Her hair was longer, certainly, but she

kept it hidden, wrapped up in cloth. The sun had made her shoulders browner. The pinprick holes in her ears had closed up. No more golden hoops. No more dangling jewels.

Titus' breath had slowed. His chest rose and fell just as the road widened and shrunk. They sat together, girl and mule, all alone. She took his head in her hands and tilted it. She wanted him to see the sky, the painting, the blazing sky-painting.

But Titus did not look at the sky. He looked at her.

And though the stars had not yet come out, she swore she saw their light reflected in his eyes. She saw that Titus was much more than he was meant to be.

POETRY BY MARTINA PRESTON

## FIRST LOVE

I think of God like I think of an ex lover  
*It's been so long, but still I miss his voice.*  
*Don't think of him for months, then all at once.*  
*I wonder if he remembers me and smiles.*

I'll admit I kept his love notes, in a drawer  
Tucked in between some books I got for free  
To throw them out seems rude, selfish, or (worse),  
Admittance of a yet unspoken truth —  
I never truly loved him.

I think of an ex lover like I think of God  
*Can't trust him too much, I'll only end up hurt.*  
*He spends his time on more important things.*  
*I'm silly to believe he thinks of me.*

I wrote him letters back, I said too much  
Papers filled with things I'd laugh at now  
I'm sure he threw them out, or maybe (worse),  
He read them til they echoed in his mind —  
He used to truly love me.

I think of God like I think of an ex lover  
*He wasn't worth the worry.*  
*I wasn't worth his time.*  
But every now and then, I'll smile softly  
Remembering each moment he was mine.

FICTION BY JASON WOODS

## THE RED LETTER

"How long do we have left?" Corporal Lees eyed his wrist.

"Seventy-five minutes, sir." The Captain didn't utter another syllable. He sighed, nodded, and then turned and made his way back to his quarters. The walk from the radio operator's suite to the captain's quarters took three minutes on a good day. Today it took seven, the Captain stopping at each doorway to stand in the stillness of the sub. The Captain was waiting for something to happen, someone to say something, someone with more authority to come and tell him it was alright. The buck stopped with him. Captain Taggart held himself up against a heating pipe and braced, trying to find something in his mind to steady himself. A word or a quote he'd heard at an earlier time, something from a greater mind that would provide the reassurance he needed, but what came out of the void of his mind was emptiness.

He had phoned ahead for the ship's Executive Officer to meet him in his quarters at ten past three, when the Captain showed up five minutes late the XO knew something was wrong. "So, what's the news?" Arnson said.

Taggart remained silent.

"Captain?"

Still nothing.

"Jim, come on. Say something."

Taggart eyed Arnson from under his cap, "I'm thinking."

"Well whatever you are thinking, think bloody fast. The entire crew is losing it and I'm not far behind them."

"We just have to keep it together for another few hours and we'll be alright. Someone will get through."

"And if someone doesn't?"

"Don't." Taggart said.

"Don't what?"

“We’ve had this conversation before. Don’t.”

“Captain, whether you like it or not, we are the two most senior officers on this ship. We need to talk about it. Where’s the letter?”

Taggart nodded toward the teak desk behind him. By the desk sat a three legged stool, with gold and red upholstery and a thirty-seven year old wine stain. It was one of the few personal items Taggart had aboard.

“Are we going to read it?”

Taggart interjected with a finger, first pointing at the desk then himself. “I will read it if the time comes. I alone will read it.”

“Don’t you want to know what we are getting ourselves into?”

“We knew what we were getting ourselves into when we joined the bloody Silent Service.”

Arnson sat down across from the stool with the wine stain. He placed his ever expanding forehead between his palms and closed his eyes. His feet were spread wide and his gaze was drawn down toward the floor. “How the hell did we end up in this mess?”

“Fire.”

“What?”

“Well, if you go back far enough with human civilisation this all started with fire. Then fire on a stick –”

“Are you really trying to make jokes now?”

“That’s ‘jokes, Captain’ to you, Lieutenant.”

“Well, Captain?”

“What else are we going to do? At this stage we might as well try and enjoy ourselves. It might be the last time we get to for a very long time, maybe forever.”

“Don’t talk like that, there’s got to be a way out of this.”

“I’ll talk how I bloody well want.”

Arnson let out a breath between puckered lips. The sound of his breath made a small fart sound and the Captain laughed. “Like that?”

“Yes, I suppose like that.”

"So this red letter, how important is it?"

"Are you kidding me? Twenty-five years in her majesty's Royal Navy and you don't know what it is?" Taggart said.

"I've been a bit busy with everything else."

"Well everything else pales in comparison to our nuclear deterrent, don't you think?"

"I think you could be a little less condescending, sir."

"You're right, I could be. Or I could be a lot worse."

"So on a scale of one to the end of the world, how bad is it if we have to open the bloody thing?"

"Eleven."

Taggart and Arnson made eye contact for a moment, exchanging tense and pained smiles. "I suppose we better go and inform the crew." Arnson said.

Taggart nodded.

The two ducked out of the captain's quarters and made their way to the bridge.

As Taggart and Arnson made their way to the bridge, Lieutenant O'Healy sat in his room patiently waiting for the day when the sub would return to harbour. After they made port he was going straight to the airport, round trip to Beijing. His Fiancé Mary-Ann had been teaching in the city for the last three months, they had decided they would spend a few weeks on holiday touring the Great Wall and the Silk Road before heading home to Derby to get married. But for now, that would have to wait.

"Afternoon, everyone. I hope we are all feeling good in spite of the heat, God knows we need to be today. I'm assured the air conditioning will be fixed soon, well as soon as we have dealt with the latest . . ." Taggart trailed off and looked out at the crew.

"Obstacle." Said Arnson.

"Yes, thank you Arnson, the latest obstacle. As you all know we have been without communication from the mainland for three days. We have tried every conceivable means of communication and all have failed. I have had the engineers check over the equipment and they have continually assured

me that there is absolutely nothing wrong with the ship. Whatever the issue is, it is with command. For those of you that were asleep during naval college, I will give you the brief rundown of what that means for us in our present state. After three whole days of failed comms, we are to initiate war time protocols. In the current political climate, that means the prepping and launching of our nuclear arsenal. Targets have been preselected based on merit of threat, and once we reach three complete days of failed comms I will read the red letter. Whatever locations are contained in that letter are the targets that we must fire upon.” Taggart held up the letter and waved it at the crew. “We have one hour left until that moment –” A hand came up from within the crowd, followed by a murmur of dread from Arnson.

“Sir, with respect, isn’t this all a little much? What you are saying is that in an hour you’re going to read a little letter written by the Prime Minister, and at that point we are going to point nukes at some random country that Whitecraft has a problem with. That doesn’t sound sane, sir.”

“Corporal, I will thank you for not interrupting me again, but given the situation we are in I will not reprimand you for that outburst. If you wish to ask something again, I would ask that you do so with a greater degree of respect. Am I understood?”

“You are, sir.”

“Corporal Hanson makes a good point, but you all know that we do not make those decisions. We follow orders.”

“Permission to speak, sir?”

“Granted, but watch your tone Corporal. I have only so much tolerance, and after the last few days that tolerance is lower than usual.”

“Thank you, sir. We all know what the protocols are, we wouldn’t be here if we didn’t. But what if we are wrong? What if there was a solar flare or something else that isn’t an enemy invasion? Surely we would have heard something, and even if that isn’t the case, this is madness.”

“Corporal, you are here because you have been se-

lected as someone that can follow orders and put your duty to protect the country before your own feelings. Was it wrong of the admiralty to allow you the privilege of working within this fine institution?"

"Sir, that's all well and good. I know as well as anyone that there is a certain expectation for us all to tow the line if we want to keep our jobs, but if we go through with this there won't be any point in having a job."

More hands went up and voices clashed with one another, filling the small space with an almost intolerable echo. "Sir, with as much respect as possible, I and the rest of the engineers think it is worth rechecking the lines. We were obviously very thorough, but that doesn't mean we might have missed something." Lieutenant O'Healy said.

"Are you telling me you don't know how to do your job?"

"Of course not sir, I am simply —"

"That's enough. What you are saying is that you disagree with my decision. I will remind you, as you have clearly forgotten, that I am the captain and you are crew. This is not a debate. This is me explaining what is happening, as I believe given the magnitude of the situation you deserve an explanation."

"But sir —"

"Do not 'but sir' me. This is not up for discussion. You should know better than that, O'Healy."

O'Healy took in a deep breath and raised his hand again, this time turning to the crew. "I, Lieutenant O'Healy, do not believe our captain is acting with sound body and mind. I believe he should be removed from his captaincy until such time as a suitable replacement can be found. I elect Arnson to take over as captain in the interim. All who are with me, please make yourself known or forever hold your peace."

From the bow to the stern, the sub was as silent as it might have been without a soul on board. Captain Taggart's face quickly turned from a hypertensive red to a suffocating purple. He extended one arm out from his torso and jabbed it at O'Healy. "How dare you! You assume to know what the

pressures and responsibilities are of this position? You have no idea! Not a single one of you could fill this position for more than the time taken for a fucking lunch break.” As Taggart reached the end of his sentence, a few of the silent faces turned to O’Healy. First there was one, then another and another, and in a little less than a minute almost the entire crew had joined O’Healy.

The Captain lowered his hand and stiffened himself against the gaze of the crew. “Can’t you see this man is not a leader? He is not capable of making the decisions that need to be made. I will not stand for it. If you want my captaincy you will have to come and take it, O’Healy.”

Arnson stepped between the two men, using his own hulking mass as a barrier between the warring factions. “Obviously this is a very important decision we have to make. Should the time come when we have to do the unthinkable, I would rather the Captain make that decision.”

The Captain turned to Arnson, then O’Healy in turn. “How long have you two been planning this?”

“Harry, don’t be ridiculous.”

“Harry? You will refer to me as sir or Captain –”

“I will refer to you as sir when you act like a sir. Accusing your first mate of conspiracy to remove you from your position is not behaviour becoming of a man in this Navy. I’m sure with a dot of reason you can agree, sir.”

“Well then, Captain Arnson. I suppose you should have your men take me away.”

“That won’t be necessary.”

“It will.” Taggart swung for Arnson, who swayed back from the blow. Another man grabbed the former captain from behind and kicked his knees out from beneath him, catching his neck and arms in a strong grip. The seasoned soldier wrestled against the hold, but his assailant was twice his strength.

“Where shall I put him, sir?”

“Restrain him to his quarters,” Arnson said.

“What about the letter, sir?”

“Commander Taggart, you are to retrieve the red

letter from your quarters. You are then to hand it to Lieutenant Donald, who will bring it to me. You will remain in your quarters until we sort this out, is that clear?"

"As mud." Taggart spat the words out as he tried once again to rip free from Lieutenant Donald's tank-like grip.

When Donald arrived at Taggart's quarters, he led him inside and waited while his former captain retrieved the letter. He turned his back on Taggart and waited while the man unlocked his floor safe. While the Captain was no longer the captain, he still deserved the privacy he had earned. Donald turned, and as he did Taggart punched him directly in the temple. He was a small man, but he hasn't risen to the rank of captain by being a timid one. Donald hit the deck, and as he did Taggart stepped over him,

"Weak fucking cowards." In his right hand he held the red letter, and in his left a small calibre pistol. Nothing too flashy, but still enough to kill a man, should the need arise. Taggart made his way back to the bridge, his gait strong and his chin held higher than usual.

"While we wait for Donald to return with the letter, why don't we try and figure out what exactly we are going to do here. We can't just go dropping nukes because we think we might be at war and some politician thinks it's a good idea to use some of them up. Need I remind all of you that the only nukes ever dropped were on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and I think we can all agree that it was an extreme response." Arnson looked over the faces on the bridge, trying to read the room. They seemed surprisingly settled given what had just happened. That all changed when Taggart walked in with a bloody palm and a gun.

"Hello again, have you missed me? Figured out what we are going to do to avoid a nuclear holocaust? Not yet? I didn't think so. While we are all here, we might as well have a look and see what the lord of the land has planned for us."

Taggart opened the letter and let the envelope fall to the ground, and as it did so did the jaws of half the crew. He cleared his throat and began, no one doing anything to stop

him. “If you are reading this, then we are at war. The enemy will undoubtedly show us no remorse. You must act for all of us. You must make the choice no one else can, so that someday we have a future devoid of the need for such violence. But at present we are not at that time, and absolute violence is absolutely required. Given the nature of this communication, we cannot know who we may be at war with, and we can only assume the worst. Therefore, you are to target the following cities with immediate effect: Moscow, Beijing, Pyongyang, and Tehran. These have been selected as the most likely aggressors, and as such need to be targeted. May God be with you all, here and now in the darkest of hours. Yours faithfully, Roger Whitecraft.’ Well, I think that about sums it up.”

Taggart turned to face the newly appointed Captain Arnson, waving his gun gleefully with one hand in the air. “Feeling the burden of command yet?” Arnson said nothing.

“We have an hour left until a full-scale launch. What are you all waiting for? Battle stations! You heard the man, we are at war!” Taggart said it with a smile, almost as if he wanted the chaos to continue. A sharp bang sounded from within the bridge, and as it did Taggart fell to his knees. Donald stood over him with his own pistol drawn, and Taggart had a hole the size of a Jaffa Cake in the middle of his right hand.

“Sir, I am detaining you under the Military Police Act of 1973. You will stand trial against a jury of your peers, anything you do or say will be used against you in the court of law. If you cannot afford a solicitor, one will be provided. Do you understand these rights as I have read them to you?” Taggart held his hand close to his chest like a newborn, his eyes practically crossed on Donald’s pimpled pompous face.

“You are a slimy little shit, Donald. Slimy.” Donald reached down to pull Taggart to his feet, and as he did Taggart kicked him away. He sprawled on the floor, reaching for his own gun that had fallen from his good hand. “I’m not going to jail. I’m staying right here and we are launching those bloody nukes!”

“Sir! On your feet now! I will not ask again.” Taggart went for his gun while Donald had his zeroed in on Taggart’s chest. “Now.”

“You said you wouldn’t ask again.” Donald’s eyes narrowed, and Taggart went to raise his arm. Donald’s hand felt like it wasn’t his own. It cramped, and every impulse in his body wanted to fire, but he couldn’t. O’Healy lunged in from the left and jumped to get at Taggart’s arm, and as he did the gun went off again. This time the bullet cracked a radar display an inch above the operator’s head. O’Healy, Donald, Taggart, and the rest all stood in mute stupefaction.

O’Healy tried to slam the gun from Taggart’s good hand, and as he did the gun went off again. This time it hit flesh, and Donald’s breath rushed from his body. There was a whimper as Arnson clutched at his stomach, blood rapidly turning the white of his shirt to a tone redder than the blood of Stalin.

That was when the comms came back on, one message directly from the admiralty. London had been the victim of a coordinated attack between the Chinese and the North Koreans. They dropped two nuclear bombs on the capital and now it was time to retaliate. Britannia was at war. This much was now confirmed, and with all the ambiguity out of the way the brave men and women of the HMS Vengeance readied themselves for what would be the most important day of their lives.

Everyone in their respective professions sprang into action. This is what they had trained for, and now they were ready. The medical staff dealt with the wounded, and the radio operators tried once again to get a message out to the mainland. Within seven minutes, the crew had prepped two nuclear missiles for launch. One for Beijing and another for Pyongyang. They were now entering the point of no return. In the interim of a failure of captaincy, Lieutenant O’Healy stepped into the captain’s boots. He organised his crew with the speed and care that the mission demanded.

From the lower deck of the bridge, O’Healy felt only

horror. Each drop of blood in his veins felt like a pirate, one that wanted to commit mutiny and seize his command from him. One that wanted to kill him and stop his eyes from seeing the unseeable that was a nightmare turned real.

They say that lions can smell fear, as can an interim captain on the brink of nuclear war. It smelled like soiled underwear and the salty musk of the human body. O’Healy could smell it and taste the fear in the air, it was like camembert left in the sun. It wasn’t just the fear of others he could feel, but the unstoppable dread in his own being, like every nerve in his body was set to burn. He wanted to scream, jump up and down, punch the walls with his face. He wanted to do anything that wasn’t what he had to do. He had a job, a mission to protect the interests of the United Kingdom, and in his role as captain the time was now. Give the order. Fire. End it. But for all the sense of duty he had within him, he could not do it.

Until he did. If there was a world left after he gave the order, maybe he’d just kill himself, maybe he’d go mad. But for now, he needed to remain true. Calm. Professional. Everyone was ready, and when he finally was, he gave the order. “Fire.”

There was a real feeling that time had stopped inside the sub, the moment before the moment. The men in the firing room heard the order on the tannoy, and as they approached their stations they turned their respective keys, pinned in the codes and pressed the big red buttons. “Missiles away.” The air in the sub stood still, no one dared a word, there was barely a thought between the entire crew. They had done the unthinkable, and now all they could feel was regret.

They had now directly taken the lives of at least twenty-five million people. He could not believe that they had done it, that he had done it. He had just given the order to kill twenty-five million people. If you took every murderer on earth from the dawn of time it would not have equalled the number of lives ended on that day by Interim Captain John O’Healy. Even Hitler killed less, the thought struck O’Healy’s

mind with the permanence of a star, not immortal but close enough.

No one cheered, no one smiled, no one felt anything but the weight of death and immediate remorse. This was not a victory. The crew took on a collective burden, and it was one they would never be able to run away from. No amount of sex, drugs, alcohol, self-harm, therapy, or religion would clean the dirt they had lumped onto their souls that day. They had all been a part of it, none of them had protested in defiance, not when it seemed as though it was necessary. Not even O'Healy, who had been the first to start the coup.

The radio on the bridge crackled to life and the voice of Michael Carson came over the line, a direct message from the head of the Royal Navy. "Who am I speaking with?"

"Lieutenant O'Healy, sir."

"What happened to Taggart?"

"He's been shot." The Admiral covered the mouthpiece, and all O'Healy could hear was muffled panic.

"O'Healy, you and your crew have performed excellently."

"Excellently, sir?"

"Yes, you have done Britain proud. The weapons you fired were duds, the threat was never real, we simply had to know how your crew would respond if we were faced with a real threat. I'm proud to say you all passed with great distinction." Great distinction?

"Sir, do you mean we haven't bombed Beijing or Pyongyang?"

"Yes, Lieutenant, that's exactly what I mean. I trust Taggart isn't dead?"

"No sir, he's being taken care of."

"You have a bright future ahead of you, O'Healy."

"Sir?"

"Yes?"

"I quit."

POETRY BY MARAH McCARTY  
**HE BUILT ME A SAILBOAT**

monstrous,  
clinically proclaimed to be nature's design,  
mother earth had never cried so hard,  
as the floods that filled the whole world.  
he built me a sailboat, and I wished  
I had been taught how to row,  
so that when the oceans spilled out  
into the pages of my poetry,  
I could rest his heart within my boat.  
the body knows before  
the news, how much has been  
corrupted. I could feel his frostbite hands,  
his unclipped imagination in my lap,  
and I stared at the world from the window.  
and the oceans continue to flood and soak  
the tile in front of the bathtub.  
he built me a sailboat, but I let it swallow him;  
I could swim.

FICTION BY ANNA MASUCHUN

## BOURBON

Sometimes the summer heat gets so unbearable that it makes us want to cut our fingers off and shove them down each other's throats. It would always happen by the lake behind her parents' cabin, on the jagged rocks where it smelled like lilac. We would skip stones by the river and make out under the water until one of us drowned, then we'd do it all over again tomorrow.

It happens every July, and she would come back like clockwork.

In the same white mustang her daddy gifted her for her sixteenth birthday, and a few dozen bottles of vodka, nodding towards the backseat.

"Get in."

And I obliged happily like a puppy following its owner. We played house.

Her name was Candace.

My mama used to tell me never to trust pretty girls with biblical names.

But the first time I kissed her, I stopped believing in God.

She's the head of the student council, valedictorian, and adopted at the age of two. Her hands were clean in that feverish mansion she could hide in. Even the world was beneath her.

I had blood on mine, and barely an apartment her parents offered to pay for if I just let go.

And we'd do this every July, pressing her lips against mine, until they bruised like rotten figs and fell like little Lego pieces. I can't let go.

She kept me like a secret, sealed shut with hot ruby wax, hidden away in the bottom drawer of her childhood

bedroom desk. Ruby like her lips, ruby like her blood. And I couldn't blame her. In it, the air ached, but it didn't ache of love, or bloody murder, it just ached of rust.

She had sage green eyes. The same shade as the models in skimpy magazines, I would hide underneath my bed as a child and tell myself I liked her eyes. She was beautiful. I, on the other hand, was not very beautiful but hungry. Just hungry.

We drank bottles of vodka until it burned our throats and we were flat-out drunk, listening to crappy love songs on the radio. It tasted like sugar on razor blades, intoxicating.

I wanted to kill her, put her heart in mine. Just once, could I have her?

But I think I've become addicted to her, and she was running out of the pills she'd crush inside my food when I pretended not to look. It tasted like opium, but so did her lips. Sweet.

I ate them willingly.

And then, over cherry popsicles and sunburn, she told me. She said it so casually, I thought she was going to tell me that she loved me. But she didn't.

"I got in," she said, her feet trailing along the river, making waves I wished were heavy enough to drown in. "To Paris."

Her face finally met mine, and she knew.

I lay back onto the rocks, the shards digging in my skin, pulling my father's beat-up old hat over my eyes, "Congrats."

Of course she got in. I knew she would get in. She knew. But I told myself I didn't. She had enough money to buy the world, and I don't think about sad things.

"How many buildings did you have to buy them?"

"Don't be like that." She groaned, grabbing the hat off my eyes and throwing it into the lake.

"You'll just forget about me."

She rolled her eyes, reaching over to kiss me, but I

didn't let her. I turned my head away and stared at the sun until my eyes watered.

"Don't be dramatic, I'll come back." She sighed without even looking at me.

But she didn't say no. Instead, she just jumped into the river and floated. Not trying to die, not trying to live either, just exist. And I tell myself the tears in my eyes are from the sun.

I just looked at her. My eyes tracing her face, her body, trying to remember the girl that I love. She looked the same but different. I understood.

Sometimes I feel suicidal, sometimes I feel the world. Sometimes I feel she loves me, other times, she wants to kill me. Sometimes I think she could, and I'd let her.

Her path was set in stone, curated by her parents. It was Paris, and then internships at art galleries. Then, it was dinner parties and wine. A penthouse in the city. Museum galas. Children. The future that had been waiting for her, like a silk dress laid out on a hotel bed. Pressed, perfumed, and paid for.

Everything I couldn't give her. I couldn't even afford community college.

Her path didn't include falling in love with a poor girl from the outskirts of town, and yet she played with it.

Offering to buy my life for silence, pay for college two states away, and never come back. My life wasn't worth much, so I couldn't take it. My life was hers.

I didn't have anything to live for. I would gladly give it to her.

I think she would push me off the second floor of her lake house and call it suicide. And they'd believe her, they always do. She had the kind of money to get away with anything and wouldn't even come to the funeral.

She's going to do great things. She is going to marry a great boy who treats her like a queen. She won't remember the girls she used to kiss in empty parking lots or beneath the water.

“Have fun,” I whispered.

She didn’t argue.

I watched her pack her bag. I watched her pack her perfume, clothes, pills, and jewelry in pretty monotone suitcases. I watched her pack us away in a small shoe box underneath her bed, like evidence.

That night, I stole one of her favorite rings from her hand when she was sleeping and a bottle of old bourbon from her father’s collection.

She never noticed, and I kept it forever. Sometimes I’d wear it when I missed her and let the radio play.

I wanted to kill her.

But instead, I remember. I play it again inside my head.

Over and over.

Like this:

Last summer, I had her in my arms. Last summer, I kissed her, and for the briefest moment in time, she was mine.

That was the thing about getting addicted to something that’s not yours. You could never get over it.

And every summer, I would come back to the lakes, hoping that one day she would come back to me. And I’d get to relive.

I heard she’s engaged now, to a man, with a ring that costs more than my life.

I guess secrets don’t get happy endings.

The vodka tasted like cheap perfume. I only drink bourbon now.

POETRY BY CONNOR SANDROCK  
**ONE NIGHT IN TALLAHASSEE**

The din of the rain against the windshield of my dilapidated Subaru is enough to drown out the memory of your voice. The flare of the lamplights in the park across from where I'm parked are enough to keep visions of you from entering my mind. There is a handle of gin in the seat next to me — a way to fill the space you used to command. I've masked the scent of your perfume with a carton of Marlboros, so much so that the smell tickles the tongue when I get in the car. The small plush doll you used to keep on the dash is gone, abandoned on a highway somewhere between Denver and Tallahassee. I am a phantom, alone in my car with the radio. Silent. I am a phantom, drifting across the American midwest. I am a phantom, yet you are the spirit that lingers.

# THE MAHEFA DIMBINIANA RANDRIANARIVELO COLLECTION

“Sarotava,” which means “mask” in Malagasy, is a series of portraits where I digitally remove the heads of my subjects. To create this series, I went out and asked random people if I could take portraits of them. I’m not used to making instantaneous photos, so it was a difficult but rewarding experience for me. Every person in the series is Malagasy, and I shot them in different locations, from Madagascar to Paris to Berlin. This project is my attempt to show that we always carry a little bit of Malagasy blood in us, no matter where we are in the world. The Sarotava series is not only about physical characteristics and identity, but also about the collective experience of being Malagasy and the shared history that binds us all together. I chose to remove the heads of my subjects to emphasize that we are all more than just our faces or our physical appearance. I wanted to highlight the idea that despite our differences in religion, sexual orientation, education, and financial status, we are all part of the same Malagasy community.

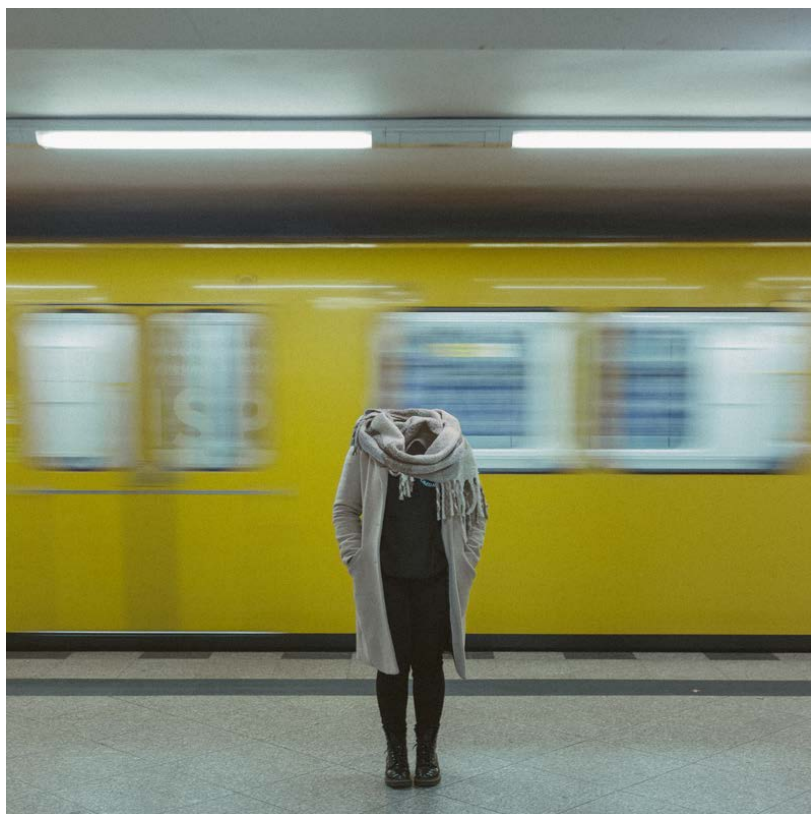
PHOTOGRAPHY BY MAHEFA DIMBINIAINA RANDRIANARIVELO

**SAROTAVA**



*Paris, France*  
*2023*

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MAHEFA DIMBINIAINA RANDRIANARIVELO  
**SAROTAVA**



*Berlin, Germany*  
2022

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MAHEFA DIMBINIAINA RANDRIANARIVELO

# SAROTAVA



POETRY BY DUARTE N. NOBREGA  
**VINTAGE REBELS**

They trace out their eyelashes  
Like Marilyn  
While trying to pull off black dresses  
Like Audrey,  
And look over their sunglasses  
Like Lolita.

Lifting their skirts up  
To bust a dance move  
Like Sophia Loren  
While arguing with husky voices  
Like Cardinale.

They light their cigarettes up  
Like Bogart  
While they flirt  
Like Sinatra,  
And drink martinis  
Like Dean.

They write posts on forums  
And on social media  
With Ginsberg's attitude  
Howling outrageous statements  
Like Kerouac  
While acting up  
Like a stubborn J. Dean  
With a mindset of  
Morrison.

Neo-vintage beat is here to shake 21st up  
With their remembrances of  
The 20th century's over-the-tops.

DRAMA BY ELIZA EPSTEIN

## TRIANGLES

### CHARACTERS

**LIZA:** 17. A girl who's in CP1 Precalculus in order to avoid Honors Precalculus.

**JASPER:** 18. The chill, popular guy on the football team who everyone knows and many want to be.

**THOMAS:** 18. The wannabe *JASPER* who makes up for his lack of athleticism with his ability to talk really loudly.

**MARK:** 18. *THOMAS'* wingman who will back up pretty much anything he says. Struggles to come up with his own ideas.

**TEACHER:** 30. A delusional teacher who's in way over her head. No discernible personality, except she really likes ringing her little bell and filling out worksheets.

### SYNOPSIS

*Triangles* follows a girl named *LIZA*, who decides to take a standard high-school Precalculus class. On the first day of class, we find that *LIZA'S* only classmates are three senior boys who failed out the year before . . . and the teacher is teaching some very basic material. But as *LIZA* continues going through each day of class, she begins to find entertainment in eavesdropping on her classmates – until their world threatens to collide with her own.

*Triangles* is inspired by my time in CP1 Precalculus during my Junior year of high school. The class was mind-numbingly boring . . . but the people in it were not! Throughout the year, I paid close attention to everything going on in the classroom – from the jock boys who loudly goofed off to the inexperienced teacher who could never quite get their atten-

tion. Triangles is about what happens when three very different worlds reside in one place. It's also about feeling out of place—whether intellectually, socially, or both. But out of place in a way that's pointed and connected.

**PLEASE NOTE:** for the sake of accuracy to the characters and the story, this play contains some colorful language.

## ACT I

*(Lights up on a math classroom with a table, a lone desk, and a whiteboard. LIZA sits at the desk, scribbling on her paper frantically. She looks up and notices the audience.)*

**LIZA:** I gotta say, I'm a great student. I mean, come on. I just wrote, like, 10 pages of notes at least. In a math class. *(Beat.)*

Thing is, though, I'm not taking notes on algebra, or derivatives, or polyhedrons. In fact, I'm not taking notes on math at all.

Let me start at the beginning of the equation.

*(LIZA walks around the classroom.)*

**LIZA:** Day one.

**THOMAS:** I don't get why Coach would be mad at Jaden, bro. Isn't Jaden on the best team?

**MARK:** But he knows that Jaden like, messes around and shit.

**THOMAS:** Damn.

*(TEACHER rings a bell on her desk.)*

**TEACHER:** Alright class! Welcome to Precalculus! I'm so excited you're here. We're going to have so much fun together this year with complex numbers, graphing, and trig identities!

**THOMAS:** (*loud whisper*) What the shit is a 'Trick Entity'?

**MARK:** Don't ask me.

**THOMAS:** Not gonna graduate, bro.

**MARK:** I know, right? My brain's too bad.

(*TEACHER rings the bell again, twice.*)

**TEACHER:** Alright! If everyone could be silent now, that would be wonderful.

**THOMAS:** (*loudly, to MARK*) Shhhhhh.

**MARK:** Hehehe. Shhhhhh

**LIZA:** (*to audience*) I have a feeling that this will be a long year.

**TEACHER:** Okay. Wonderful. Now, today is an exponentially exciting day, because we're starting our first unit: Exponents!

(*JASPER opens the door to the classroom and saunters in with his hands in his pockets, walking coolly to TEACHER in slow motion.*)

**THOMAS:** (*whispering to MARK*) Oh shit.

**MARK:** That's gotta be Jasper, from the football team.

**THOMAS:** Varsity, bro.

**JASPER:** *(to TEACHER)* What up. This CP Precalc?

**TEACHER:** *(scrambling for attendance list)* Yes. Jasper, I presume?

**JASPER:** Yep.

**THOMAS:** *(loudly)* I knew it.

**TEACHER:** Do you have a pass?

**JASPER:** Nah.

*(JASPER flips his hair and sits at the table with THOMAS and MARK.)*

**THOMAS:** Yo Jasper!

**MARK:** What up?!

**THOMAS:** Besides the ceiling!

**JASPER:** Just chillin'.

**THOMAS & MARK:** All right!

*(TEACHER starts ringing her bell again. The real bell rings, and everyone but LIZA files out.)*

**LIZA:** Well, it seems there's a hierarchy among them. Just like there's a hierarchy of math classes in this school. And something tells me that CP precalculus is far from the top.

## ACT II

*(THOMAS, JASPER, MARK, and TEACHER reenter. Same positions as before. The bell rings to start class.)*

**LIZA:** Day two.

**THOMAS:** Yo, Jasper!

**JASPER:** What up.

*(JASPER and THOMAS dap up. MARK wants to get in on it, so he also daps up JASPER.)*

**MARK:** Where's the game?

**JASPER:** Needham, bro.

**THOMAS:** *(trying to get in on conversation)* Imma go into marketing. You don't have to do anything and you get that dough.

**MARK:** Genius move, bro.

**LIZA:** What's he going to sell? Stupidity?

**JASPER:** I know this one guy who has a huge TV. HUGE TV.

**THOMAS:** That's what I'm saying, bro. Ten years bro. I'm a millionaire, bro.

**MARK:** Yes sir!

**THOMAS:** And you know what's gonna happen when I make my first million, you know how big my TV's gonna be?

**MARK:** Huge, bro!

**THOMAS:** (*showing TV dimensions*) Up there, one two three there. Then up . . .

**MARK:** We gotta be on the grind!

(*MARK starts doing pull-ups under the desk,  
while THOMAS bangs on the desk and counts reps aloud.  
TEACHER rings her bell.*)

**TEACHER:** If we could all settle down now, that would be great!

(*THOMAS, JASPER, and MARK do not settle down.*)

**TEACHER:** We're going to get started with our very first Do Now. So exciting! Now, does this look familiar to anyone?

(*TEACHER draws a weird looking triangle on the board.*)

**THOMAS:** (*loudly*) Yeah.

(*MARK and JASPER break into laughter.*)

**TEACHER:** Great! What's it called?

**THOMAS:** (*pointing to MARK*) I think he was the one who said "Yeah."

**MARK:** (*to THOMAS*) Not cool, bro.

**JASPER:** It's like a graph or something. Trust.

**LIZA:** (*aside*) I think they're joking. But still.

**TEACHER:** Can anyone help them out? Anyone?

*(All but LIZA freeze.)*

**LIZA:** *(to audience)* I'm pretty sure I know why those three are in this class. They failed out last year, and now they're back for more. But why am I here? *(to TEACHER, who unfreezes)* It's a right triangle.

**TEACHER:** *(aloud)* Ding ding ding!

**LIZA:** *(to audience)* But maybe the real question is why wouldn't I be here? Maybe it's because I'm tired of staying up all night freaking out about logarithms and then asking my genius Russian stepfather for help who immediately gets worked up: "It's idiotic the way they teach math in this country. It's drills instead of understanding. In Russia, understanding is mandatory." Or calling up my math and computer science major brother in college, who every five seconds tells me "This should be easy." Or getting desperate enough to ask my English Professor mom for help, who loves to mention that she got an A in AP Calculus in high school. But apparently AP Calculus meant nothing back then because if for laughs you ask her what a polygon is she just shouts "A shape with many sides!"

I don't need this. Trust me, I went through the entire stress cycle in Honors Math last year. Did I cry a lot? Maybe. Every night? Well . . . only on nights before tests. Which ended up being, um, every other night.

*(Beat.)*

I guess I'm a try hard who in this particular case didn't want to try hard. So this is what I signed up for.

*(The bell rings. All but LIZA exit.  
JASPER, THOMAS, and MARK race for the door.)*

### ACT III

*(TEACHER, THOMAS, and MARK file into the classroom.  
TEACHER starts setting up the whiteboard for class.)*

**LIZA:** Day three.

**THOMAS:** What up, bro!

**MARK:** Yo yo yo.

*(They chest bump. The bell rings for the start of class.  
JASPER walks in just afterwards.)*

**THOMAS & MARK:** Yo!

**THOMAS:** Perfectly timed, bro! You like, were late AND on time at the same time.

**MARK:** I'm in awe, bro.

**JASPER:** Yeah it's a new strat, man. I gotta be late without getting another tardy or I'll probably fail out of school.

**THOMAS:** For real. I have so many absences, bro.

**JASPER:** Oh yeah?

**THOMAS:** Five in Personal Finance, three in Bio, twenty in English –

**MARK:** Twenty absences?! It's only September 10th.

**THOMAS:** Don't question me, bro.

**MARK:** My bad.

**THOMAS:** Twenty in English, two in Computer Science, seven in goddamn History –

**JASPER:** We’ve all been there, bro.

**THOMAS:** – oh, and one in Gym.

**JASPER:** Bro, you have to make that one up!

**MARK:** (*to THOMAS*) He’s right bro, you have to!

**THOMAS:** Yo I know it’s bad!

**LIZA:** (*writing on paper*) “Bro you have to make that one up!” This stuff’s too good to make up. Why invent theatrical dialogue when you can just take notes?

(*TEACHER starts ringing bell.*)

**TEACHER:** Okay, class! Hello! Let’s get in our seats. Now today we are learning about polynomials! So fun. I’ve been looking forward to this all morning!

**LIZA:** (*to audience*) Is she okay?

**TEACHER:** But since polynomials are a bit of a . . . difficult topic, we’re going to start by just reviewing what we know about long division.

(*TEACHER starts slowly writing a problem on the board.*)

**JASPER:** If the numbers go past single digits I’m out of there, bro.

**MARK:** Facts.

*(TEACHER finishes writing the problem.  
It's 108 divided by 4.)*

**TEACHER:** Alright. We're starting off a little tricky, but I know you guys are smart! Who thinks they can answer this? Take your time.

**THOMAS:** Should I shoot my shot?

**MARK:** Yeah. Shoot it.

**THOMAS:** Imma see if I can get this right.

*(THOMAS raises his hand, and TEACHER calls on him.)*

**TEACHER:** Yes?

**THOMAS:** *(confidently)* NEGATIVE PI OVER TWO!

**LIZA:** *(to audience)* I'm serious. This happened.

**MARK:** You tell 'em, bro!

*(MARK and JASPER give THOMAS  
congratulatory slaps on the back.)*

**TEACHER:** Uh . . . not quite. We don't even need pi in this situation. That's kind of another thing.

**THOMAS:** Shit. Pi is always supposed to be the answer.

**MARK:** Talk about that chewy pie crust, bro.

**TEACHER:** Anyone else have an answer? Anyone at all? Liza, maybe?

**LIZA:** *(barely glancing up from her writing)* 27.

**THOMAS:** I knew it bro! That's literally what I said.

**MARK:** That's literally what he said, bro! Like what are you doing? Come on.

*(The bell rings for the end of class.  
All but TEACHER and LIZA leave.)*

**LIZA:** *(writing)* I knew it bro. That's literally what I said.

*(LIZA notices the audience again.)*

I may have been invisible in that math class, but soon enough I was almost looking forward to those 65 minutes.

**TEACHER:** *(to herself)* I think I'm really connecting with them. The little bell makes it fun.

*(TEACHER picks up her bell and cradles it.  
LIZA stares at her in a mix of wonderment and disgust.)*

## ACT IV

*(THOMAS, MARK, and JASPER waltz in, hooting loudly.)*

**LIZA:** Day four.

*(The bell rings. LIZA gets to writing.)*

**THOMAS:** You know I almost had a girlfriend once and it was almost perfect. Dead ass, bro.

**JASPER:** You only had a girlfriend once?

*(TEACHER writes “TEST DAY” in big letters on the board.)*

**THOMAS:** Uh. Well. Bro I –

**MARK:** Oh shit.

**THOMAS:** What?

**MARK:** Bro. Look at the board.

*(THOMAS looks around everywhere but the board.)*

**JASPER:** *(seeing board)* Oh shit.

**THOMAS:** Why is everyone saying “Oh shit?”

**TEACHER:** Alright everyone! It’s test day!

**THOMAS:** Oh shit.

**LIZA:** Not really sure what we’re being tested on, but okay.

**TEACHER:** *(to herself)* Oh, the joys of testing!  
*(to class)* Now. Before we start, now’s the time to ask any questions you have about the material. I’ll write some of the topics we covered over the past few days to jog your memory.

*(TEACHER slowly writes “exponents,”  
“right triangles,” and “counting” on the board.)*

**MARK:** Shit, what do we do?

**THOMAS:** This test is gonna be impossible, bro.

**JASPER:** How the hell am I supposed to get into college?

**MARK:** Where you looking at right now bro?

**JASPER:** (*pronounced “dart-mouth”*) Dartmouth, bro.

**THOMAS:** Dartmouth is crazy bro!

**JASPER:** I know . . . (*forgetting THOMAS’ name*) Tim?

**THOMAS:** It’s, uh, Thomas.

**JASPER:** Sure.

**THOMAS:** (*loud whispering to MARK*) Dartmouth is ass, bro.

(*MARK laughs. LIZA laughs too, quietly;  
while she writes everything down on her paper.*)

**JASPER:** (*to MARK*) Whatchu laughing about bro?

**THOMAS:** Yeah Mark, whatchu laughing about bro?

**MARK:** Nothin’ bro. I wasn’t laughing about nothing. Bro, I actually wasn’t. I ain’t doing nothing, bro!

**THOMAS:** Mark was laughing about Dartmouth. Yo, Jasper, guess who was laughing about Dartmouth? Mark was.

(*TEACHER finishes writing and turns around.  
Rings bell like 500 times.*)

**TEACHER:** Eyes on me, please! Great. Does anyone have any questions?

**THOMAS:** Guys, stall. (*loudly*) What’s a triangle again?

**JASPER:** And is long division like division but you do it for longer?

**MARK:** Uh . . . why'd you become a math teacher?

**LIZA:** Okay, I gotta give it to him. That was kinda smart.

**TEACHER:** (*surprised*) Well. The first two might take a little longer for me to explain, but the last one is a no-brainer. I just always loved . . . filling out worksheets.

**LIZA:** Well that explains a lot.

(*Lights fade to black. As they fade up, TEACHER is still talking and we see math written all over the board.*)

**TEACHER:** So, we need to consider “long division” not really as “long” in time, but as a longhand way to solve the problem. Let me draw you another example –

(*The bell rings.*)

**TEACHER:** Goodness! Where has the time gone?

(*JASPER, MARK, and THOMAS give shouts of joy as they shove stuff in their backpacks.*)

**THOMAS:** Finally! I'm actually not taking math anymore bro, I'm retiring.

**MARK:** Yo! I'm so done with this class, bro.

**TEACHER:** (*emphasizing “long” to make long division pun*) Well, have a good long weekend everybody!

(*LIZA stands up and packs up quickly, papers in hand. She starts walking towards the door. Suddenly THOMAS runs past, followed closely by MARK and JASPER.*)

**THOMAS:** (*running past LIZA*) I'm free!

*(In his haste, THOMAS knocks into LIZA and makes her papers scatter all over the floor. He sees this and freezes right outside the door. JASPER and MARK freeze too, mid-run.)*

**LIZA:** My heart dropped. My papers were everywhere. In one second they would see I'd been copying every word they say. What will happen? What will they think of me? The problem was unsolvable.

*(They all unfreeze.)*

**THOMAS:** My bad.

*(THOMAS, JASPER, and MARK finish running out the door, trampling over the papers on the floor.)*

**LIZA:** I forgot. We're all in one classroom, but we're really in our own worlds.

*(THOMAS peeks his head out the door and throws a football to JASPER, who catches it at the other door.)*

**LIZA:** They're on a football field. She's in . . .

**TEACHER:** *(singing to herself)* Filling out worksheets! I love filling out worksheets! And most of all I love my little bell . . .

*(TEACHER exits, softly ringing her bell.)*

**LIZA:** Well, I don't really know where she is. And me, I'm onstage. But maybe it's not so one-sided. While they trample over my papers, I plot their every word. They give me an angle, and I give them an audience.

*(LIZA sits back in her chair. BLACKOUT.)*

## ARTIST BIOGRAPHIES

### M.S. Blues

M.S. Blues is a multiracial, queer, and versatile writer who has been writing since the age of seven. Her work revolves around the darker pieces of humanity that society tends to neglect. She has been represented by multiple literary magazines and currently serves as an editor to *The Amazine* and *Adolescence Magazine*. Her Instagram handle is @m.s.blues\_

### Holly Day

Holly Day's poetry has recently appeared in *Analog SF*, *Cardinal Sins*, and *New Plains Review*, and her published books include *Music Theory for Dummies* and *Music Composition for Dummies*. She currently teaches classes at The Loft Literary Center in Minnesota, Hugo House in Washington, and The Muse Writers Center in Virginia.

### Eric Ellis

Eric Ellis is a queer, nonbinary poet and visual artist living in the Indianapolis area. In 2021, they received their MFA from Butler University and contributed as a poetry reader for *Booth: A Journal*. Their work has previously appeared in *Florida Speaks* (2014), *Driftless Magazine* (2015), and *Allium, a Journal of Poetry & Prose* (2024).

### Mackenzie Enteadó

Mackenzie Enteadó grew up on the Jersey shore with her parents, 5 dogs, and 5 cats. She now attends Stetson University in Deland, Florida with her 16 year-old cat. She studies psychology and creative writing and plays a multitude of board games in her free time. Mackenzie previously published poetic works in the *OCHS Speakeasy* including poems such as "The Hotel," "Who," and "The Loyal Bouy."

### Eliza Epstein

Eliza Epstein is an incoming college freshman based in Massachusetts. She has directed her original plays "Triangles" and "Long Kitty" at her high school, and her plays "And, Scene!" and "Triangles" each received staged readings in Boston.

Whether she is acting, writing, directing, or even crocheting, she hopes to create art that brings joy and helps us to see the world in new ways.

### **Emma Florez**

I am a junior studying professional writing at Champlain College, focusing on poetry and creative nonfiction. I have personal essays published in *Chivomengro* and poetry in *Thanks Hun Zine* and *The Empty Magazine*.

### **Alice Fraser**

Alice Fraser was born in Onley, Maryland in 2000. She got her BFA from the Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA) in 2022. Alice has exhibited some of her work such as her thesis show at MICA Fox 419 in Baltimore, and at the Harford 100-Mile Biennial Exhibition at Chesapeake Gallery in Harford Community College. Currently she works as an art finisher for Wallcraft Inc., where she refurbishes restaurants, homes, and museums such as the National Museum of Women in the Arts.

### **Future Focus Photography**

Future Focus Photography creates imaginative and experimental Sci-Fi digital art using Robots. The goal for this project is to show everyday scenarios where robots replace humans. Hope you enjoy and don't forget to check us out @future\_focus\_photography on instagram!

### **John Grey**

John Grey is an Australian poet, U.S. resident, recently published in *New World Writing*, *North Dakota Quarterly* and *Lost Pilots*. Latest books, "Between Two Fires," "Covert," and "Memory Outside The Head" are available through Amazon.

### **Sofia Heins**

Sofia Heins is an artist from Pennsylvania with an obsession with reading and making art. She challenges herself to read as many books as she can each year, and to also channel her energy into digital art and paintings when she is not cooped up in a book. Sofia loves to make digital art, but also loves to find time for traditional mediums like oil painting.

### **Mike Islas**

Mike is studying creative writing at UNCA. He has been performing spoken word and competing in international poetry competitions for five years.

### **Angela Joynes**

Angela Joynes is a Canadian living in Tennessee. She is disabled by Lupus and Respiratory Failure. She has a BA, MD, Certificate in Creative Writing and has published short fiction in various lit journals. Twitter/X @angela\_joynes

### **Marie Magnetic**

Marie Magnetic is a Chicago-based visual artist. She is queer, neurodivergent, Blackfeet, Jewish, and Irish. Marie was awarded a Bachelor of Science in Psychology from Central Michigan University in 2017, working in social services and several library roles before returning to art during the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2023, Marie held her first solo exhibit at Little Broken Things in Chicago. Marie is a Foundation House, Haven Foundation, and New York Foundation for the Arts grant recipient. Her work has been published in *Haus-a-Rest*, *HNDL Mag*, and *Flash Frog*. You can find her work at mariemagnetic.com.

### **Mehul Malik**

Mehul Malik prefers to be called an artist – since writer, filmmaker, actor, screenwriter is too long of a description. Other than that, he is mildly fond of breathing. Probably.

### **Anna Masuchun**

Anna Masuchun is a young writer and poet who explores themes of grief, love, and longing. She writes hybrid prose that slips between poetry and prose.

### **Marah McCarty**

Marah McCarty is a writer and higher-education instructor based in the beautiful mountains of Appalachia. She holds an MFA in Creative Writing and an MA in Medieval to Early Modern Literature. Her previous publications include poetry and short stories. McCarty's work emphasizes the importance of legacy and spiritual growth.

### **Alan Meyrowitz**

Alan Meyrowitz retired in 2005 after a career in computer research. His writing has appeared in *Eclectica*, *Existere*, *Front Range Review*, *Inwood Indiana*, *Jitter*, *The Literary Hatchet*, *Lucid Rhythms*, *The Nassau Review*, and others.

### **B. Alex Mill**

I am a former academic living in Ontario who writes short fiction. My previous work has appeared in *Litro Magazine* and *Coffin Bell*.

### **Savannah S. Miller**

Savannah S. Miller (she/her) is a writer, theatre artist, and converted Memphian. Her works have been published or are forthcoming with the *Jelly Bucket*, *Flash Fiction Magazine*, *North Star Journal of the Sierra Club*, and others. She is a current MFA student at Augsburg University. Read more at savannahsmiller.com.

### **Mark Mitchell**

Mark Mitchell graduated from Cal State Long Beach with a degree in Screenwriting. He currently lives in the greater Los Angeles area where he is a member of The Blank Page Writers Club. His short fiction has appeared in *Hightower Magazine*, *Illustrated Worlds*, and *Canyon Voices Literary Magazine* as well as the anthologies *Nightmare Fuel: Body Horror* (Cloaked Press) and *Through the Briar Patch* (Hollow Oak Press). Follow him on instagram @markmitchell.writer.

### **Curtis Moore**

Curtis Moore lives and works in rural Nevada. Most recently, his nonfiction essay “Coparenting With Cormac McCarthy” was shortlisted in The Milk House’s Best of Rural Writing 2023 Contest.

### **Martina Reisz Newberry**

Martina Reisz Newberry is the author of 7 books of poetry. Her most recent book is “Beyond Temples” (Deerbrook Editions, May 2024). She has been included in many literary magazines in

the U.S. and abroad. She has been awarded residencies at Yaddo Colony for the Arts, Djerassi Colony for the Arts, and Anderson Center for Disciplinary Arts. Passionate in her love for Los Angeles, Martina currently lives there. Her city often is a “player” in her poems.

### **Duarte N. Nobrega**

Duarte N. Nobrega was born in Madeira, Portugal in 1996. He’s a holder of a BA in Languages and Business Studies from the University of Madeira. He’s a screenwriter, a novelist and a poet. His first sold script, a crime/drama, titled “Dices, Blood and Sand” has been sold to an indie producer from Los Angeles. Duarte’s fiction and poetry has been published in *Twenty-Two*, *Twenty-Eight Literary Magazine*, several times in *Teach Write* by Katie Winkler and in *Birmingham Arts Journal*, and in the Brazilian literary magazine *Mirada Janela*. Find him on Instagram @neovintagepoetry and on Twitter @neovintagepoet.

### **Donald Patten**

Almost overnight, COVID-19 has changed the way people interact with each other, and with our own bodies. We live our lives in vulnerability during this historically significant time of disaster. In the past, significant painters, the old masters, would depict historically significant disasters that happened to them. As an artist that is learning the techniques of these masters, I have the opportunity to create long-lasting visual information that depicts the trauma of this pandemic.

### **Jeanne Paulino**

Jeanne Paulino is an aspiring memoirist and poet. Paulino graduated cum laude and was nominated into Phi Beta Kappa from Northwestern University in 2020 with a BA in Sociology and International Studies. At Northwestern, Paulino wrote for Spoon University. Her articles amassed over 2 million views and have been featured on Teen Vogue and Insider. Paulino currently teaches special education English in Chicago.

### **Erika Payne**

Erika is a young woman with a passion for wildlife photography, who has honed her skills capturing the beauty of nature. Her journey began as a young explorer, fostering a deep connection

with the environment. Through her lens, Erika seeks to inspire conservation and appreciation for biodiversity. Her photography showcases a blend of technical expertise and artistic vision, evident in her published works. Erika's dedication to storytelling through imagery aligns seamlessly with her mission.

### **Tia Pennells**

I am particularly interested in visual storytelling, through both written word creative pieces as reflected by my choice of degree (English Literature and Creative Writing) and voluntary editorial experiences, visual art and illustration (both traditional and digital) which is shown through the continued success and demand of my paid commissions, and online social media presence. I hope to take this interest further by exploring video editing and content creation on my Twitch channel.

### **Andrew Pimentel**

I am a former U.S. Postal Service mail carrier, and currently an undergraduate at San Francisco State University studying creative and technical writing.

### **Martina Preston**

I am a senior in university, double majoring in Communication and English. Some of my recent professional work can be found at [www.clippings.me/martinapreston](http://www.clippings.me/martinapreston).

### **Langston Prince**

Langston Prince is a college student from Los Angeles. She has been writing for as long as she can remember and hopes to write for as long as she can. Over her life, she has accrued a litany of useless, unmarketable, and out-of-date skills that help to enrich her writing.

### **Mahefa Dimbiniaina Randrianarivelo**

I craft surrealistic portraits with societal narratives. Raised in Madagascar, I draw from its diversity to address issues like poverty. Inspired by cinematography and surrealism, I blend societal concerns, aiming for tangible change. My goal is to foster inclusivity and empowerment, envisioning a world where art transcends boundaries for a fairer society.

### **Grace Renshaw**

Grace Renshaw is a student at Gettysburg College, majoring in English with a Writing Concentration along with Cinema and Media Studies.

### **Roland Ponce Rusinek**

Roland Ponce Rusinek, a native of southern California, is the queer offspring of two immigrants from different countries. Roland is a performer and writer who has worked in the entertainment industry all of his life. He has performed on Broadway, at Lincoln Center, in national tours, at Carnegie Hall, in regional theaters, on television, in films, and even sang on a movie soundtrack. He is now focusing on his career as a writer. He thanks you and sincerely hopes you enjoy his play.

### **Connor Sandrock**

Connor Sandrock's journey of mental wellness and introspection have allowed him to create evocative poetry. He invites others to engage prose and verse with him, in their own journey of self-discovery.

### **Tyler Robert Sheldon**

Tyler Robert Sheldon's seven poetry collections include *Everything is Ghosts* (Finishing Line Press, September 2024). He edits *MockingHeart Review*. Read him in *The Los Angeles Review*, *Ninth Letter*, *Pleiades*, and other places. Sheldon earned his MFA at McNeese State University.

### **Cameron Shipley**

In my studio practice you will find mostly portraits and figurative paintings. I explore emotional reactions to color while playing with a surreal pallet. I have always been fascinated by the way art has told the history of our world for millennia, proving existence and ways of life throughout time. My body of work is a micro version of that; a proof of my life and the others that have existed around me. I paint modern-day humans while studying traditional oil painting techniques and styles.

### **Rachel Singel**

Beyond bringing attention to the immense complexity of the

natural world, one of my primary goals as an artist is to raise environmental consciousness. I print on handmade papers made from recycled materials such as old cotton shirts and linen sheets, as well as plant fibers, especially those of invasive plants. I hope that making sheets by hand not only can help the environment, but also can promote sustainability.

### **Travis Stephens**

Travis Stephens is a tugboat captain who lives and works in California. His book of poetry, “Skeeter Bit & Still Drunk” was published by Finishing Line Press. Visit him at: [zolothstephens-writers.com](http://zolothstephens-writers.com)

### **William Weiss**

William Weiss is a writer who works with disabled adults to help expand their capabilities and possibilities. As a musician, he loves the rhythm behind words and the diverse dialog of interpretation poetry brings. His long-term goal is to publish a poetry book meant to be read out loud.

### **Paz Winshtein**

I believe that art is a way of bringing new ideas into the world. Whether it is art that expresses a mood or tells a story, it is a form of communication. My paintings are about contact with the outside world and the difference between self and environment. I combine expressive new styles with a respect and understanding of classical forms.

### **Jason Woods**

Jason Woods lives in the Scottish Highlands. When not writing he keeps bees, repairs bicycles, and builds houses. One day, he hopes to cycle around the world and maybe publish a novel or two.

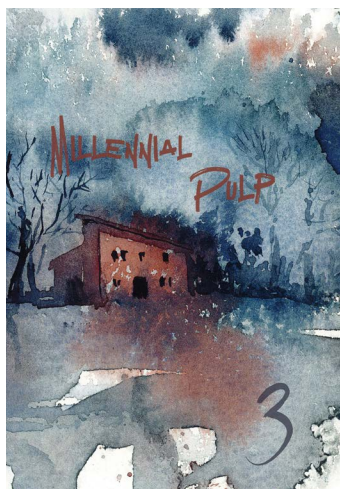
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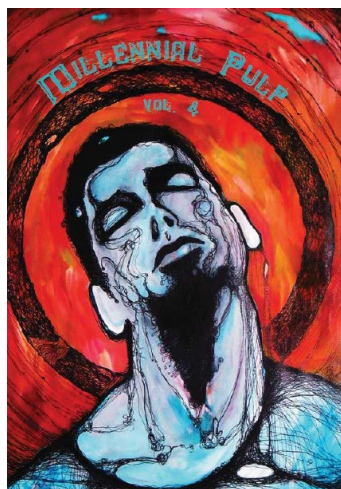
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