

# CULTERATE

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SPRING  
2025

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**Culterate**

A GLOBAL ART AND LITERATURE PUBLICATION BASED IN INDONESIA. FOUNDED IN 2024, WE ARE AN INDEPENDENT DIGITAL PLATFORM COMMITTED TO CELEBRATING STORIES AND CULTURE THROUGH WRITTEN AND VISUAL WORKS BY ARTISTS FROM AROUND THE WORLD.

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As a digital magazine, we want to recreate that tangible feeling of holding a latest edition in your hands and flipping through its pages, but in a more eco-friendly way. Aesthetics is key to that experience. This issue is particularly special, as it's our first to feature visual artists alongside writers. While going through each piece, figuring out how to arrange them, we actually found some rather serendipitous connections between the visual and the written works. Where we did, we experimented the graphics to enhance their messages, as you'll see within these pages.

I personally thank each and every contributor for sharing your brilliant works with us; the loveliest team for all you do; and to you — dear reader, I hope you enjoy it.

— Keisya Cleine

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*Meditation* (1900)  
Léon-Jean-Basile Perrault (French, 1832 – 1908)



SHABNAM  
MIRI



FROM WOMEN AND PLANTS COLLECTION (2022)

19.5" X 27.5" MARKER ON CARDBOARD

# Nature's Marks

Sara Stegen

I have a smattering of birthmarks  
As if my body is covered in rust.  
I carry them like a map of islands  
Gifted upon conception  
Read my rusty map – if you wish

I am covered in rust-coloured silent gravel  
Tread lightly please!  
Or the pebbles will fall off the map

I have a smattering of ash fingernail moons  
On arms and legs and on the bridge of my nose  
Where chickenpox marked me

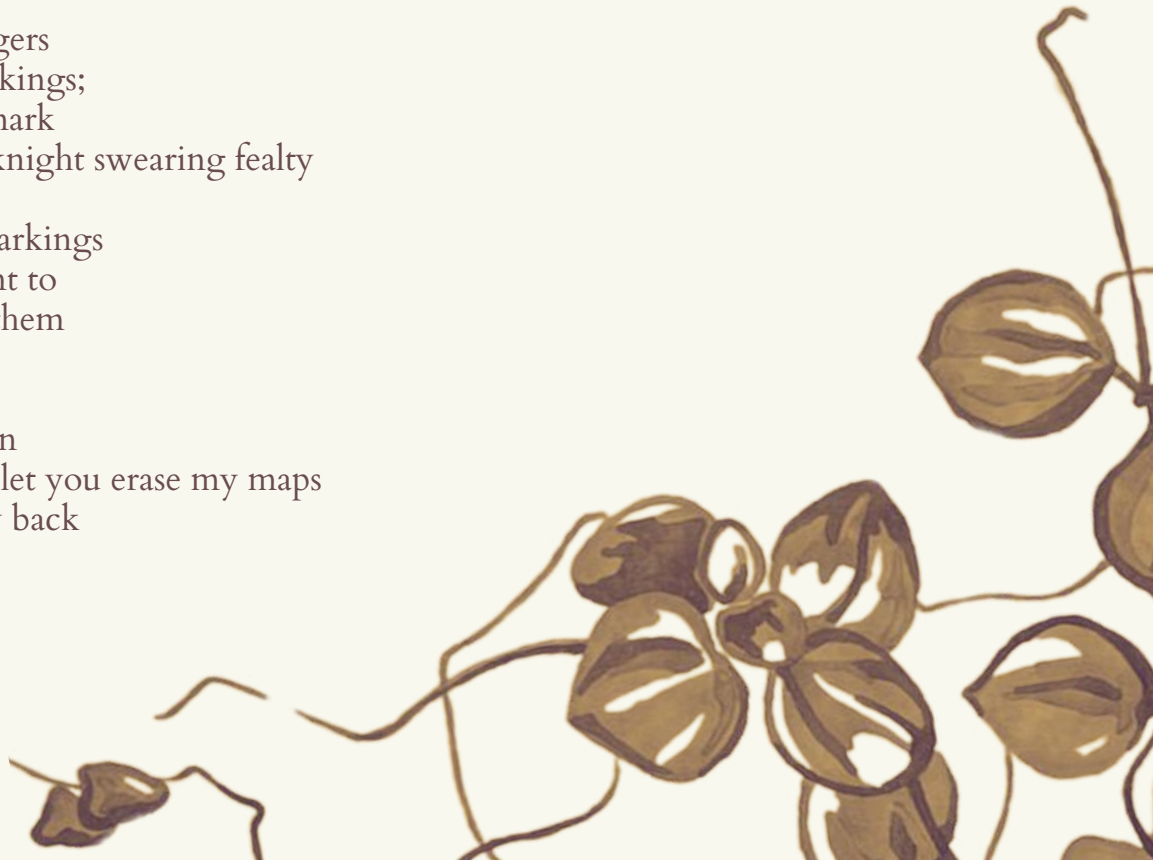
I am covered in a blue-veined design  
Lines on the body carrying oxygen –  
So I can live

You may trace your fingers  
Along the lines and markings;  
You may kiss the birthmark  
On my left hand like a knight swearing fealty

Should you mind my markings  
Want to erase them want to  
Wun a citrus peel over them  
Bleaching them  
Know this  
The memory will remain  
I am not sure that I will let you erase my maps  
How will I find the way back  
Without my map?

Perhaps instead I will let you leave a mark  
But know it will be invisible  
The most cherished marks are etched  
On the lining of my heart

My body is adorned  
With symbolism  
Nature's markings  
Emblems of earthly love  
If I trust you enough  
(I will)  
(I will) Explain their meaning  
To you softly  
So you will believe you are dreaming  
While I encircle your left wrist  
Marking you



# Old women breaking through

Sara Stegen

Become the knife-edged wrinkles  
Become the chasm between young and old  
Become the frozen river of time's stories our children read in awe  
Become the never forgotten of the wrong that was done to us  
Become the claw footed incomparable and fearless Athena  
Become the shuttered windows we want to break in to obtain its wisdom

We fear the knife edge, let the knife edge fear us  
We fear wrinkles, let wrinkles fear us  
We have nothing to fear but fear itself  
Break us, we will break through with soundless crack to come and break you





# You opened me

Ralph Culver

You opened me—with your lips, your hands, your intuition—in service of the heart as much as pleasure, those two facing pages from the same book. The evening skies opening for the moon. It had been a long time since I felt such awakenings, this density of light and its concomitant shadow. More than a thing broken being made whole again: a replenishment. The way houseplants that have been neglected accept the offering of water. Not a new thing, but the essential thing done in a new way. All the incertitude in me set free by your rapturous eyes.



25" X 25" OIL ON CANVAS (2024)

SHABNAM MIRI





## Pro- and retroactive pink

Jacqueline Schaalje

of the first fingers in the sky, streaks of pink  
above ugly roof tops, scarred with neglect.  
sun collectors and drab water tanks above  
pink bougainvillea, despite the winter. a school  
of pink socks harvested in the wash this week.  
pink having a blackout. pink the baby's palate,  
the children's nails. mine, after fungi treatment.  
none for grey lungs! health markers on call. pink  
abundance in shops, not enough colour. once humanity  
wrote poetry around the bells of wild cyclamen, now  
we clap our hands to find calm in a salmon sea  
of city windows. that I want your tongue in my mouth  
stops only at red. our messages of peace pink,  
against regime change, unconstitutional rulings.  
i've been separated from a routine of cleaning, working,  
sleeping well. i can't hear another word of hate,  
or rocket sirens, or digging underground. skeleton  
boughs bring pink almond blossoms. confused  
about the season, i wear pink for pink's sake.



# Chain Reaction

Jacqueline Schaalje

Could it be that sweetness is the prototype of all desire?  
Michael Pollan – The Botany of Desire

The mother bites into the bitter  
Cyanide of the apple seed  
She would never give her child.  
From the five-pointed chamber  
She alone eats, and finishes the core  
Of what would make him spit.  
Sensuous frogs echo her blush cheeks  
From the garden pond. What do they know  
Of a sudden wildness it might yield  
If she plants another seed?  
We can't know what we're sowing  
Nor what we'll reap, or even less;  
Genetics don't always follow the sap.  
We map out sweet intentions  
Until the beautiful flesh is grown,  
And leave it tunnelling under the green.  
Perhaps the next life won't be sweet.  
She nuzzles her son's forehead:  
So smooth, so like a thinker.  
Unlike her, he barely speaks two languages,  
That's how long she's nurtured him.  
In the musical accent of productivity,  
He announces his return to the apple valley—  
Not Alma Ata, but somewhere he'll call his.  
There, further training will teach him  
The smooth weight in his hand is of a size  
Not unlike a woman's breast.  
He can choose to believe that the sweetness,  
Drives him, forgives him when he'll  
Tear into gleaming skin,  
how his heart jolts when he throws it.



# Abature

Özge Lena

A midnight dream of beaten  
grass in a dim clearing. I track drops

of blood through radiant pillars  
of salt. If I can't find the hunted

deer to plant salt on its wound  
it will die. Instead, I find a blind

well. I run to jump down to end  
in the clearing, but get stuck in a time

cycle to live the same moment  
after another. Scarlet drops,

salt pillars, lost deer, the well,  
and the fall, then the grass. I turn

in this loop until I see; the deer  
wears my face. A wake up call.







# A Girl Wears a Swan Costume

Özge Lena

to come down the stairs  
with pure white feathers  
revealing her bruised skin,  
with the flawless body  
of a swan affixed on her  
breasts like a predator,  
its neck circling her nape  
as the tip of its beak points  
at her vein of life, as close  
as a father who watches her  
with his deep mouth open  
as she slowly comes down  
by introducing herself as  
Leda, now that she can be  
whoever she wants in that  
costume party full of other  
predators, for whom what  
supposed to be a festival  
of pleasure dipped in sweet  
binge turns into a disclosure  
of the endless darks she had  
to spend with a swan perching  
on her frail chest, feeding  
on her innocence.

# Chocolate or perhaps Caramel

Doug Van Hooser

Today I want to resolve nothing.

I am tired of the tug of war.

The rope slips and burns my hands.

I want to watch the birds play in the bare branches,

think it is spring. Walk down

the sidewalk without the pain of a stone

in my shoe. Trip on what I don't expect,

fall, and not bother to get back up.

Follow in the footsteps of someone who shifts,  
shimmies, and obviously does not know

where they are going. Or maybe it's that

they don't care. Or maybe they stumble

away from what they do know. Be someone,

who does not expect frosting.

That's the problem. I want a sweet life,  
not one of meat and potatoes. A daily dirge

that winds the clock and sets alarms.

Routine's constant tinnitus. I want to quit tacking  
and run with the wind. Let the sails billow

and pull me through today's sieve

unstrained by do's and don'ts. Let desire sew  
a down comforter. Allow me to wallow

like a melting pat of butter.

Build a smokey, cackling, spark spitting bonfire.  
The flames' heat a lullaby. Stress fractures soothed.



# New Doors

Lynn D. Gilbert

*TW: violence (contains graphic descriptions)*

“Most of them don’t make the hospital, let alone a trauma center,” the surgeon says quietly.


“Those who do reach one, need repeated trips to surgery before rebuilding can even start.”

Her diagrams show how combat ammo explodes in the warm caves of the body, and exits through a ragged red blossom many times larger than a regular bullet leaves.

Clearly, diagrams aren’t enough to spur reform. Emmett Till’s mother insisted on an open casket, so that tens of thousands could view the damage to her son’s body.

People saw it for themselves; they saw at the funeral, or in the papers, and they couldn’t deny it. Things began to change then; it seems we need to go through this once more.

The public has to see the bodies, in color, the smears, the pools, the faceless faces, the severed arms and legs, the flesh torn away when bullets saw new doors for life’s departure.

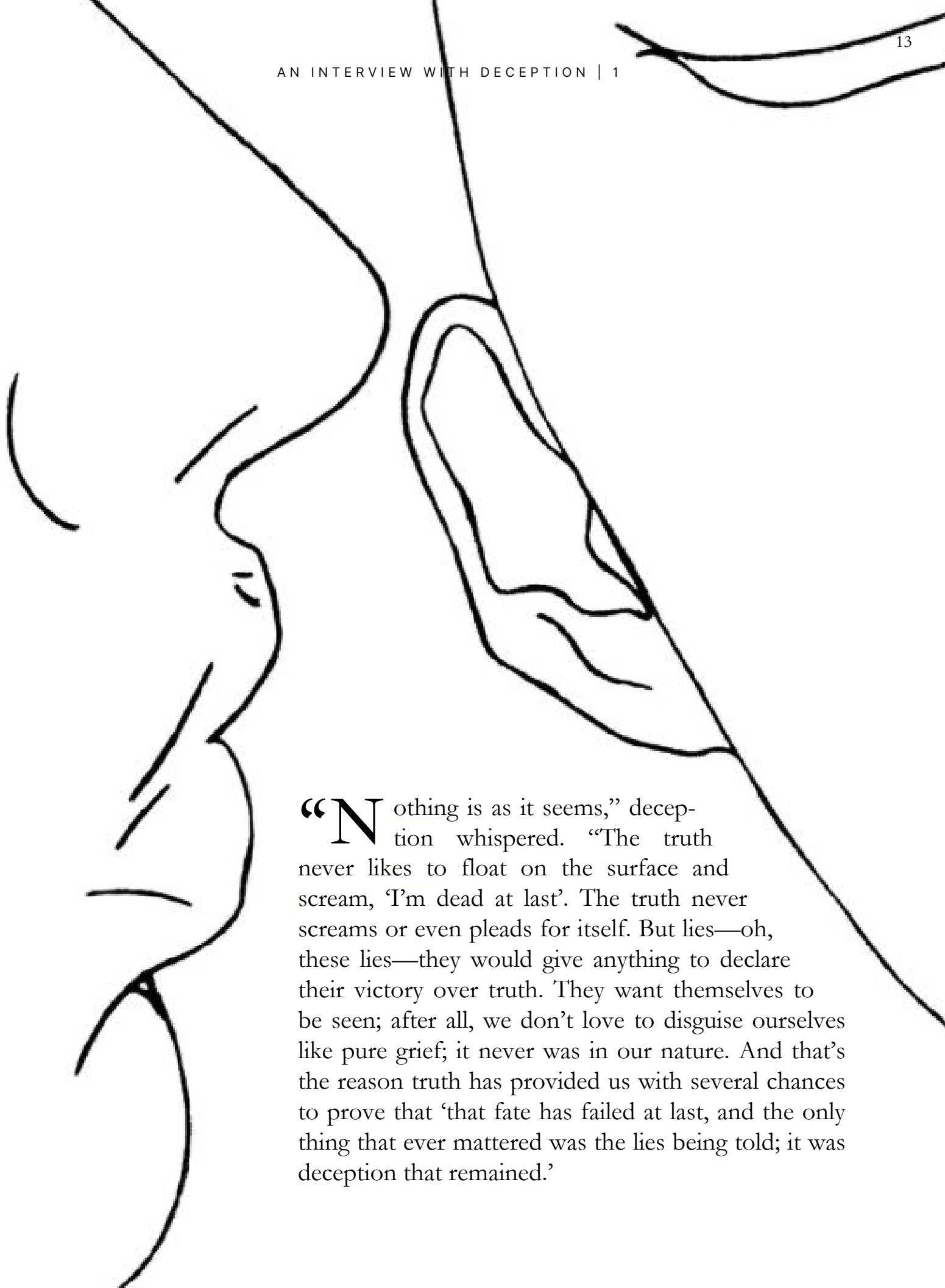


# An Interview with Deception

by Khadija Bilal







“Nothing is as it seems,” deception whispered. “The truth never likes to float on the surface and scream, ‘I’m dead at last’. The truth never screams or even pleads for itself. But lies—oh, these lies—they would give anything to declare their victory over truth. They want themselves to be seen; after all, we don’t love to disguise ourselves like pure grief; it never was in our nature. And that’s the reason truth has provided us with several chances to prove that ‘that fate has failed at last, and the only thing that ever mattered was the lies being told; it was deception that remained.’”

You see, nobody fancies truths these days; myths and stories filled with fallacious supreme heroes, perfectly edged with a tint of deception, are what have always seemed appealing to audiences. Stories filled with beings made truly upon delusions and fantasies have kept us alive after all this time; why would we hate them? Why would someone warming hands in the pure warmth of blazing fire prefer to look at what's burning to keep them warm, even if it's their own house turning into mere ashes? Truth never manifests itself, but rather relishes its speaker, and to add one more facet, it manifests its 'listeners' the most. But truth is completely unaware of this fact that disclosing 'truth' may not seem like the hardest task, but hearing one would unquestionably trigger the imminent evil within us. A monster will be born—a monster so heinous that even demons would be terrified to reckon with the devilish deeds that monster commits.

Now carefully try to grasp the birth of evil, a monster that was shaped. Who do you think is at fault here? Was it us by any chance? Who provoked that depraved being so corrupt and unfortunate? It's certainly obvious who was at fault.

Mark my words, dear friends: 'Truth never spoken, never damaged'.

Lies are what keep us out of conflicts and trivial subjects, effectively out of danger. But truth is foe with peace; one can never find tranquillity and peace in search of honesty. It's indeed a blind road, my friend, where no one likes to venture these days, constantly carrying the burden of an unidentified destiny. Modern mortals prefer a direct and absolute road where success is as bright as a day, and certainly it is us that offers the ultimate manoeuvre of manipulation and deceit.

"See, there's an irresistible desire amongst individuals to conscientiously avail themselves of the tricks of deceit and foolery, although they know the mighty price of deception. But what do we do if they persistently presume that this is what makes them different from all other beings? Such fools, *oh dear*, think lies are better at disguising themselves and therefore believe that they can hide worlds inside them. Worlds filled with deceptive morality and wickedness weaved into them like some spiralling beads and laces twisted together, adorned with fancy squandering feathers. Only if they knew how fragile this world was that even a bit of truth would shatter it to pieces, such fools. But there's nothing to be concerned about, my dear friends; there's nothing to be concerned about. We should not ruin it for them, or they would be devastated

already.

We should not ruin even the thought of it. Their love for these deceptive lies, which they so dearly carry to several places, fancies it like nothing alike has ever dared to come into existence. The absence of which they have felt their whole life, the pleasure they always lacked. Its attraction to deceit makes them linger longer for it. We must not ruin their world, my dear friends, not at all. Notice how their sweet lies induce a profound grace and charm in them, maintaining an aura of grandeur. There's no reason to ruin it for them, dear friends, or they'll never so ardently like us as before. Their profound indulgence in weaving their own world of hoaxes and befitting tricks and their obvious struggle to not fall behind must not be ruined by telling them the truth.

*Fin.*



CAR

IGAL STULBACH



ON THE HEAD  
IGAL STULBACH





CHAIRS IGAL STULBACH



# Jason

a.d.

*"I have erred and am distraught in wretched and helpless ruin."*

—Apollonius Rhodius, tr. R.C. Seaton

you smell the blood  
before your eyes witness the scene:  
heart beating madly, heart caught inside  
your once-heroic throat.

foolish and feverish you thought you could escape,  
ascend beyond this misery that weighs your head like a crown  
but the gods, eternally opaque, had other plans;

leaden-limbed, you cross  
the threshold of your deserted home,  
follow the stain that has split the floor like a seam.  
you see their bodies bent like discarded sacks,  
the vision settling with alarming clarity—  
small limbs distorted, gore crowning their sinless heads.

you would like to touch them, but don't dare trespass  
this corona of death.

you retrace your life, searching for an instance,  
the hint of a frayed thread—

in the back of your mind, you know:  
your delusive hands will never be abluted,  
will never unknow  
the weight of your guilt.

above you, sorrow-bound and godlike,  
the woman who once loved you  
cradles the knife still dripping  
with your one, futile life.







# Visions of Acropolis

Spencer Keene

The column crumbles under  
the weight of its Ionic history

Limestone rib bones collapse  
like ancient dominoes

The lonely spirits populating  
the agora moan elegies

Vesuvian blooms crest over  
Mediterranean vistas

The heat of a thousand Greek  
suns blisters the earth

Tiled mosaics recite their epics  
in the nook of a public bath

A collection of testaments to  
an antique magnificence







MAN EMERGING CHRISTOPHER WOODS







HOMELESS  
MADONNA

CHRISTOPHER  
WOODS





CHRISTOPHER  
WOODS

“ —

These are portraits of people who, for one reason or another, are often looked down on by others in society. I photograph all kinds of subjects, but I am drawn to these people who seem almost invisible. Perhaps this attempt on my part gives these people some amount of dignity—that they are not forgotten.

# Night Watch, 1916

by Jonny Eberle

Mary was used to waking in the middle of the night. She dressed in the dark and paused only once at a strange sound outside. Was it the murmur of machine guns or just the branches of the dead rowan tree tapping on her window? She held her breath, listened intently, but heard nothing more.

Continuing to get ready for her rounds, she moved softly through the house, pulling on her dark blue overcoat and the wide-brimmed felt hat adorned with the silver badge of the Women's Police Service. On her way out the door, she picked up the sealed telegram from the neat stack of letters. She had been avoiding it, but her landlady kept moving it to the top of the pile as new post arrived. She tucked it safely in the inside pocket of her coat and closed the door behind her.

The night sky glittered with stars and the first chill of autumn was in the air. Mary's boots clicked on the cobblestone street. As she turned the corner, she saw the glow of an electric light in the window of a house down the street. Again. She marched up to the door and knocked. A waltz was playing inside on a gramophone. She knocked a second time, more forcefully.

The old man who lived here was a widower. He was also a German. A moment later, he appeared at the door—all wrinkles and wisps of white hair.

"Good evening," he said, smiling warmly. Mary did not reciprocate.

"Mr. Fischer. Are you aware that there is a blackout in effect?"

"A blackout?"

"All lights out, Mr. Fischer. Including yours."

"Oh, yes, the light," the old man turned and looked back into his house, as if suddenly remembering that it was there. "Of course. Is there anything else I can do for you, constable?"

"That will be all."

She waited on the steps until the light was doused. He probably just forgot. He always forgot on clear nights.

The rest of the village was dark. The whole coast would be dark on a night like this. Even London would be shrouded in black. It was their best defense. Somewhere overhead, she could imagine soldiers in behemoth zeppelins looking down at the inky landscape, straining to see the glint of starlight on the Thames, dropping hellfire on a sleeping village where a light had been left burning.

The boom of the big gun battery on the coast startled her. She reminded herself that it wasn't necessarily an air raid; it could be a warning shot across the bow of a fishing boat sailing too close to shore. Still, her pulse pounded as she reached the village green and found a man sprawled on the grass.

"Who's there?" she called out. As she drew near, she recognized him. He was a patient at the military hospital who often wandered into the village pub to let the old men buy him drinks. He lay on the grass in a wrinkled uniform, a Victoria Cross pinned crookedly to his chest.

"Lieutenant George Bratton Stuart, Royal Flying Corps," he said, saluting the sky. The stench of beer and tobacco lingered around him.

"On your feet, soldier." She poked him in the chest with her baton. He turned his head to squint at her.



"No thanks," he said.

"Come on. An arrest would not look good on your record."

"Go on, love," he said. "Call the police."

"I am the police."

He laughed. She scowled down at him.

"Get up," she said. "I can't leave you out here, not with bombs raining down."

"Tell the constable I'm happy right here."

"Constable Williams left for the trenches six months ago."

"You mean there's no proper police in this village?"

"I have a proper holding cell, if that's what you're asking."

"Then I guess you'd better lock me up, love, because the world's gone mad."

"I don't think that will be necessary," Mary said, poking him again. He staggered to his feet, nearly toppling over, but she caught his arm to help him balance.

"Bloody knee keeps giving out," he said. "Crashed in the Ardennes."

"Nice and slow then." She guided him across the street to a bench in front of the butcher shop and helped him sit.

"What I'd give for a steak," George said, rubbing his bad knee and gazing longingly at the row of scrawny rabbits hanging by their feet in the window. "Your husband let you become a policewoman?"

"My fiancé is in the army," she said.

"And he approves of this?"

"We're both serving our country."

"I see."

Mary didn't know what Reg thought. In fact, she hadn't heard from him in months. He simply forgot to write, she told herself. They had been engaged only a week before the war broke out. He enlisted on a whim and forgot to tell her until the night before he shipped off to France. He was absent-minded like that. Not at all a soldier.



As the span of time between his letters stretched from a few days to a week to several weeks, and as her friends left home to work in munitions factories and hospitals to support the war effort, Mary decided it was better to stay busy than to sit at home and worry. She felt the weight of the telegram in her pocket.

"Come on, let's get you back to the hospital," Mary said, offering her hand to help George up, but he waved it away. They walked as fast as the wounded pilot's knee would allow, which wasn't very fast at all, and Mary felt as if the Kaiser himself were stalking them from the shadows.

"Will you be shipping out again soon?"

"Not a clue," he said. "There's not a damn thing wrong with me."

"You said there was a crash."

"That was two years ago. I'm here because I shot down a zeppelin."

"I don't understand."

A low rumble rose from the east. George looked up, straining to see anything in the dark. At first, Mary didn't register it, assuming it to be yet another phantom terror conjured by her mind. A lion, ready to leap from its hiding place to devour her, perhaps. But the louder it grew, the more apparent the truth became. Not an animal. Not a dream. Engines.

"Do you know what happens when you drop a zeppelin out of the sky?" George asked.

"Is this really the time? We need to find cover!"

"They send you home. Nobody likes a dead hero. They like them to smile for the papers, tour hospitals, tell the lads 'Good show' and pin medals to what's left of them."

"Come on, the family up ahead has a cellar. We can wait there."

"Tell your fiancé that. You tell him: Do something stupid, survive it, and they'll send you home, whether you want to go or not."

There was a new sound along with the drone of propellers; like wind whistling through the branches of the dead rowan tree outside her window. The whistle became a scream. Mary pulled George to the ground and covered her head with her hands.



The explosion was farther away than she expected, but close enough that she felt it shake the ground beneath her. She got to her feet, though her ears were ringing, and ran in the direction of the blast. She turned the corner and saw a pile of bricks that had once been Mr. Fischer's house. Sections of the houses on either side were also missing. Women and children coughed as they climbed out of the rubble. Someone screamed.

Mary froze. If she tried to walk, she was sure she would collapse and shatter into a thousand shards of glass. Of all the thoughts racing circles around her mind, she came back to a single one over and over: Did Mr. Fischer turn the light on after she left?

George limped up beside her.

"The world has gone mad," he said. He plucked a cigarette from its silver case and lit it. Mary reached into her pocket and pulled out the telegram. She had dreaded opening it for fear it would say Reg was dead. Now, she worried it said he was coming home a hero. She didn't know what she feared more—losing him suddenly or bit by bit. As the roar of engines and the scream of bombs died off in the distance, she ripped open the envelope.



*Fin.*





# Raphael's Persistent Putti

by Fay L. Loomis

Everytime I write a check, I am pulled into the enigmatic faces of Raphael's putti. These baby angels can be found everywhere: on candy and cookie tins, coasters, T-shirts, embroidery samplers, umbrellas, wrapping paper, and toilet tissue. The United States Postal Service even got into the act when Terry McCafree,

manager of stamp development and art director, created two Love stamps featuring a putto.

I discovered these little guys while studying art history at Michigan State University. While I enjoyed the putti, I wasn't smitten with them until years later when my husband and I stayed with friends in Rotterdam. An enormous print of the winged cherubs hung across from our bed. I was hooked.

In addition to buying checks embossed with the putti, I researched Raphael's majestic *Sistine Madonna*. I'm glad I did; I discovered tantalizing details which have come to light about this magnificent High Renaissance painting.





MADONNA DI SAN SISTO (THE SISTINE MADONNA)

Few know this precious detail is a footnote, so to speak, in Raphael's majestic High Renaissance painting, the *Sistine Madonna*. In 1512, the elderly Pope Julius commissioned the *Sistine Madonna* shortly before his death. It was long thought the painting was intended to hang above his coffin. Now, however, it seems more likely that this piece was created for the altar of the Benedictine church of *San Sisto* (Saint Sixtus) in Piacenza, as a gesture for that city's allegiance during the war to consolidate the Papal States. In this carefully composed offering, Raphael purposefully draws us into the religious and political life of the papacy.

The Madonna is framed by soft green curtains that open to the heavens. She protectively cradles her boy-child Jesus while St. Sixtus, portrayed as Pope Julius, kneels to the left and St. Barbara genuflects on the right. The volume in the curtains is echoed in the drapery of the figures, creating a larger-than-life scene.

This masterpiece derives its title from the church where it was installed. Below Julius, we see his triple papal tiara, crowned with an acorn. The acorn and the Rovere oak leaves embroidered on his cope remind us that Julius was a member of the noble della Rovere family, and St. Sixtus was the family patron saint.

Pope Julius is portrayed as a pious man fervently seeking a heavenly reception by intercessors Saint Sixtus, a Roman Christian martyr; Saint Barbara, patron saint of death and liberation from an earthly prison; and the Virgin Mary, the ultimate mediator. Some say the strip of wood on which the putti



perch is the top of a coffin; others suggest it separates the heavenly from the mundane worlds. Whatever the significance, the viewer is directed by the pointing finger of St. Sixtus and the gaze of the other figures to look across from the altar to a crucifix upon which the young boy will one day hang.

Usually, the Madonna embraces an infant. Here, we see a young boy held in his mother's arms, presaging the pieta, when Mary will grieve for her dead son lying across her lap. This may explain the look of terror on the child's face, as he has not yet accepted his Father's will. In sharp contrast, the serene faces of the women indicate they are resigned to the sacrifice of martyrdom.

The look on the upturned alabaster faces of the putti isn't clear, despite the perhaps apocryphal story that Raphael was inspired by two boys he saw looking into a bakery window. We are left to wonder what these junior members of the angelic hierarchy know that we don't. Both saints hold a hand to their hearts, suggesting the deep mystery of life and death. The curtains of eternity have parted, and the floating Madonna draws us into the rarefied and luminous air of heaven, filled with more cherubs. We can almost hear the words from the *Salve Regina*,

prayer for the dying:

*"Come thou then, our Advocate, turn upon us thy compassionate eyes that we know so well, and after this exile show unto us Jesus, the blessed fruit of thy womb..."*



LA FORNARINA, ALSO KNOWN AS "THE PORTRAIT OF A YOUNG WOMAN"

While models for Renaissance paintings are rarely identified, the model for the Madonna, an idealized mother, is likely the woman in Raphael's *La Fornarina*, Margherita



Luti, daughter of a baker (*fornaro*). She was also Raphael's mistress. The gossamer veil that partially covers her torso reveals an innocent, yet sexually inviting image, while an expensive pearl brooch, possibly worn for a wedding, is pinned to her silk turban. Margherita is the Latin word for pearl.

More conspicuous marital hints include the blue ribbon on the woman's arm carrying the artist's name and a background of myrtle and quince foliage, symbolizing love, fecundity, and fidelity. After Raphael's death, a ruby on the model's left hand was painted over by his students, prior to the sale of *La Fornarina*.

Did Raphael secretly marry his mistress to avoid scandal, as has been suggested? While we can't be sure of the claim, we do know Raphael was engaged to someone else, Maria Bibbiena, the niece of a Vatican cardinal, but did not marry her.



LA DONNA VELATA (VEILED WOMAN)

Margherita was also the model for the *La Donna Velata* (veiled woman) and other madonnas. The pearl brooch that adorns the woman in *La Fornarina* is the same as that worn by the model for this painting. Interestingly, the brooch is in the same position on both women's heads.

Raphael died at around 37 years old. Artist Giorgio Vasari, first-known art historian, first-class cad, and author of *Lives of the Most Eminent Italian Architects, Painters, and Sculptors*, provides us with details of Raphael's life. He states that Raphael was an amorous person who died of excessive lovemaking and, on his deathbed, dedicated funds in his will to care for



Margherita. Vasari also mentions that Raphael was a gregarious socializer who kept harmony among his friends and the workers in his large atelier.

While we can't verify all that Vasari recorded, we are familiar with the fact that Renaissance artists had to cultivate patrons with power, money, and a willingness to allow the creation of a new standard of beauty inspired by the art and philosophy of ancient Rome and Greece. Raphael masterfully delivered this new aesthetic in the *Sistine Madonna*.

The painting was sold around 1752 to August III for the Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister (Old Masters Picture Gallery) in Dresden, creating a buzz in Protestant Saxony. By the end of the 18th century, the *Sistine Madonna* had influenced literature, art, photography, and music. German hausfraus happily extrapolated the putti, and the cherubs entered the secular world of kitsch.

During WWII, the Dresden gallery stored the painting in a Swiss mine until it was liberated by the Russians in 1945. Ten years later, the painting was restored to the German people as a political gesture of reconciliation.

If Raphael weighed in now, how would he respond to the fate of the *Sistine Madonna*? Would he be shocked to learn that his most fa-

mous Madonna painting is relegated to the annals of art history? That his mysterious baby angels have far surpassed the work's popularity and have become global travelers?

Why do these bambinos continue to engage us and pervade pop culture? I don't know.

What I do know is that these persistent putti bring me consistent joy.

*Fin.*





# And You, Jehanne

Adelie O. Condra

You enter yourself—  
thrown at the throne  
because you see  
God. It's 1428.

Joan of archangels  
and saints. You call yourself  
Jehanne and  
you were never taught to read—  
can you sign your own name?

You call yourself *la Pucelle*  
with a man's silver protecting  
your young bones. Hold your standard holy  
like a dull, destructive sword.

Desperate times plead for girlhood  
and or martyrs. Yours roars  
at the enemy advancing!  
And they bleed home, fatigued, siege-done souls, nine  
days later. Victory.

You unbury a crown from cathedral mud—  
knees a mess.  
Stick-scraping heaven-bodies on stallions  
as they whisper where for you to go.  
Enter yourself  
into coronation and France adorns your King.

Heroines equal perfection— you are one  
of those things. Joan: dark  
captured, scapeless, a Catholic warrior *ado*. And  
truthless, the Bishop says,  
*you homicidal trans viper rotten body*  
*of Christ*.

You do not bleed home.  
You burn  
At a sinless stake.  
Torch fingers grating. Getting in  
under skin. Sear the seer.  
Inferno Catherine, Michael, Margaret.  
Share an end with May, always  
the saint.

Take your battled soul home. To the peasants  
or Church or Heaven.  
They overturn the verdict and verdict to turn  
you patron. Sign your name  
however you like  
and rest.





# Art

Mark J. Mitchell

She dreams:

Be my heart  
Clyfford Still.

Cover me  
Stretch me

Taut as canvas,  
Soft as flesh.

Color me,  
Dye me bright

As Spring,  
Almost here.

Give me yellow.  
Call me blue.

Unfold me  
On vast walls

That hold  
Vacancy at bay.

Batter my heart  
Clyfford Still,

She dreams  
Beside her husband.



A Siamese  
cat senses  
springtime.

LINDA ANN  
LOSCHIAVO

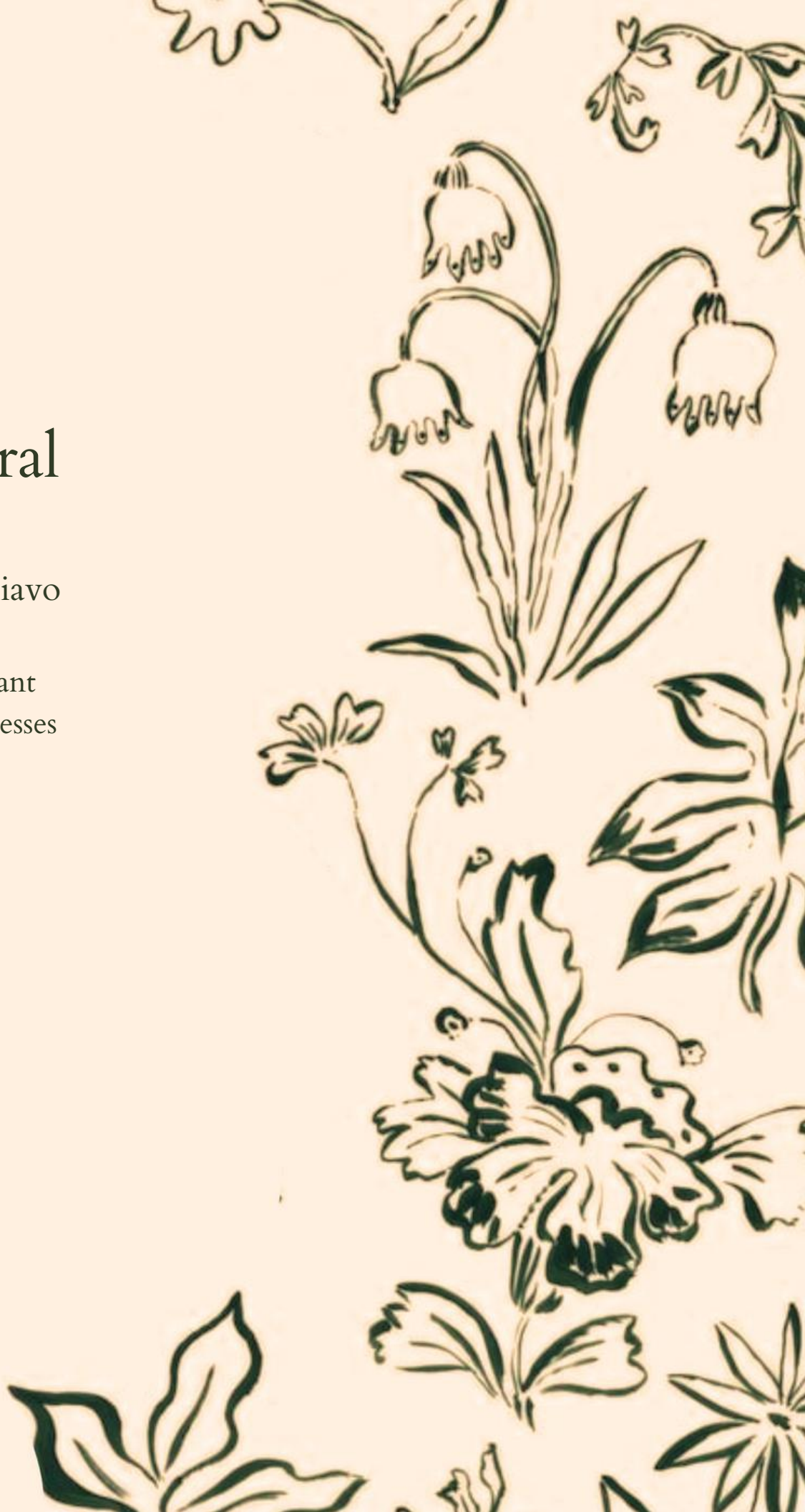




# From Floral to Faded

LindaAnn LoSchiavo

Spring's floral pageant  
gaudy as peasant dresses  
autumn's amnesia





# The Daughters We Keep Underground

## In the Garden of Borrowed Bones

by Diya Tyagi

i. Mother plants daughters like tulip bulbs, each one a promise buried in winter soil. She tends them with teeth instead of tenderness, waters their sleep with thimbles of forgotten lullabies.

ii. The earth keeps secrets poorly—rootlets push through like memories, green fingers reaching for any light that hasn't learned to look away.

iii. At night, the garden whispers multiplication tables of loss: three daughters under the rose bush, five beneath grandmother's broken mirror, seven split between moon phases and the spaces where arrows land.

iv. We count backwards in generations: great-grandmother's hands, smooth as river stones; grandmother's teeth, filed to points; mother's laugh, like scissors through silk. What shapes are we carved to inherit?

v. The daughters grow wild despite the dark, their bones elongating into escape routes, hearts percussion-loud against packed soil. They drum: we are not yours to keep, we are not yours to keep, we are not—

vi. In spring, when young mothers walk past, the garden trembles with underground wings. Each flower opens like a mouth to say: once we too were planted here, once we too learned to grow thorns, once we too broke earth to breathe.

vii. Mother tends her garden with clockwork grace, pretends not to hear the midnight blooming of rebellion, the slow percussion of daughters becoming birds, becoming arrows, becoming gone.

viii. Under the moon's cracked eye, she sings to empty beds: la-la-la, my darlings, la-la-la, stay. But the earth cannot cage what was born to fly away.



Iain Ryrie  
Alaina Hammond

IAIN RYRIE  
ALAINA HAMMOND

“

**Iain Ryrie** (1949–2011) was my high school theater teacher and director, and also a dear friend. I met him in 1995, when I was 14. Long after I graduated in 1999, Iain continued to mentor me in my playwriting career, and in my journey to become a teacher myself. To this day, I channel him in my teaching and in my art, always trying to make him proud. A Renaissance man, his expansive legacy includes the Brookline High School Rugby Team, which he established in 1980.





**Nicole Jenkins**  
(1980-2025) was my  
best friend. We met  
in 1987, when we  
were six years old.  
Nicole wore many  
hats and hairstyles  
with flair. Proud  
mother of Marley.  
Adored fiancée of  
Tobias. Cultivator of  
a small rainforest's  
worth of plants.  
Painter. Poet.  
Bunny Mama. I'm  
honored to have  
called Nicole family.

NICOLE JENKINS ALAINA HAMMOND

# Six Hours

by Arch Ramesh

*TW: substance abuse*





**T**hese days Ashu recounts his life to himself like a countdown. But the closer it gets to one, the ombre of his memories fade to white. Six hours ago, he went for a quick walk to get some fresh air. Five...he ended up at the liquor store in between Wang Noodles and Charcoal Kabob, picking up four airplane bottles of Smirnoff by the register after avoiding the larger gleaming bottles. Four...while he was still sitting on the curb outside, the cashier joined him for a smoke break and shared a bottle of rum. Three...he walked another half mile to Jimmy's Pub, the kind of joint where time of day was irrelevant to the regulars and to Jimmy. Two and a half hours ago, he lost a coin toss to another regular and asked Jimmy for a round for everyone. Two hours ago, Mandy's name throbbed in his head beneath Garth Brooks singing about his *Friends in Low Places*. Two...he texted her... *but what?* One hour and forty minutes ago, Jimmy kicked Ashu out for punching a regular who'd asked him why ICE hadn't deported him yet. One hour ago...he isn't sure.

Now, Ashu is headed back the way he came six hours ago. He pictures himself as a floating head, the rest of him swathed in an invisibility cloak. The icy air seeps into his thin track pants, a sharp thrust of reality reminding him his legs are moving, even without him knowing. He isn't dressed for the Northeast windchill, because six hours ago he had just gone out for a quick walk. He feels something leaden in his thin jacket and





takes his phone out of his pocket. Dead. His eyes, blurry from more than the cold, wonder if he had imagined texting Mandy, that maybe even the bottle knew nothing good could come from it. He walks without knowing when he started or when he'd stop, but his legs don't seem to mind. The inky blanket of the night is the perfect cover for aimlessness; save for the silhouettes of trees long bare from the season's havoc, he is alone. The crescent moon hangs high and haughty, and Ashu pictures himself as the cow that jumped over the moon, light on his feet, and for once doing something improbable.

His legs stop. It takes him a few seconds to realize they are responding to a sharp crackle from the woods to his left. He squints and searches for something vile but is greeted with dense nothingness. His sister would ask him how he walks alone at night in the woods; *aren't you scared?* But Ashu has never feared ghouls or carnivores or serial killers. What could be darker and meaner than his own mind? What could threaten him more than his own sanity? Why look over his shoulder for demons that ravaged him from the inside out? Another crackle. He braces for a quick end; he can't endure the contemplation of a slow release. *Crack*— a flash of amber, and a small fox scurries past him and into the night. Ashu's legs resume their motion while his eyes search for life and his mind contemplates death.

Now he is past the thick woods, and the filigree of bare trees gives way to the towering silhouettes of houses; the only kind there are in suburbia—extra-large and sanitized. Yellow lights illuminate lives inside, curtains pulled back, secure in the ambit between neighbors. Out here, space isn't a premium; it is a birthright. Distance is deliberate. Ashu only vaguely remembers living in Mumbai as a child, in a one-bedroom apartment where the entire family of four slept. Neighbors would come over unannounced bringing the leftovers of whatever they had cooked that day, staying for chai and gossip. Children would disappear for hours among the dozens of stacked apartments, and no one worried; someone would deposit them to their parents at the



end of the day. He yearns for that kind of closeness now, for relationships that don't need to be questioned, for the claustrophobia of commitment.

Ashu now stands behind the house he recognizes as his parents' neighbors'. The grandmother of the family, whose dog Ashu walked occasionally, stands near the window. Her four grandchildren who flank her on either side, have been homeschooled and have never lived anywhere but in that house. Ashu envies them—their lives compact with contentment, for the innocence that comes with not knowing any better. He stands still now, hoping the shadows cloak him, and watches as the family gathers around a table. The father, a burly military veteran, is at the head, smiling faintly as he looks down at the table. Ashu thinks he can hear faint tinkles of laughter in the hush of the shrouded woods. He can't see what is on the table, but he pictures it to be a glistening turkey sticking its legs off the plate like it is tanning. Ashu has only ever celebrated one Thanksgiving in his life, and it had been with Mandy's family. Their house had been redolent with cinnamon all day, as the family ladled cups of hot cocoa and cider and sat around the fire in the West Virginia mountains. Ashu had emptied whiskey into his cocoa to dull the feeling that he was never meant to be there. Mandy's mother had complimented Ashu on his English, asking how it was so good. Mandy's father had asked him how he could believe there was more than one God, why his religion worshipped elephant and monkey-faced statues. That night, Mandy told him he had to convert to marry her. But he wasn't religious, he told her; he wasn't converting from anything, and he couldn't suddenly believe in a God he never had.

Ashu starts another countdown. Twenty-four years ago, he would hide behind his mother's pallu, the long drape of the saree behind her back, feeling her love for him radiate like heat, peeking out into the world, feeling unready for it. Sixteen years ago, he sat bleeding, tasting metal and grit, wishing he knew what it was like to want to fight back. Ten years ago, when he asked someone for directions to his first college class, he was told to go back to where he came from. That night he had his first beer at a fraternity house. Three years ago, he met Mandy—Mandy with the sunny hair and freckles that danced on her face like art. Five months ago, she left him after he had too many tequila shots at her brother's graduation party—Mandy, for whom the world fit just right. What happened after was like broken glass, jagged and strewn. That's the thing about countdowns, it could get him to where he is, but where does he go now?

# Key Food

by Brittany Ackerman

I don't remember my body on the changing table, the infinite diaper changes, the undressing, the dressing. I don't remember headbands on my head or pulling socks from my feet. But I remember vividly the sliding of my little legs through the leg holes of the grocery cart, the cold metal against my skin, the rubbery handlebar, the bumping up and down from a wobbly wheel or an uneven floor. I remember the aisles of Key Food, the grocery store of my youth in Riverdale, New York. I remember piles of potatoes, boxes of Graham Crackers, the blue cans of Pepsi that came in packs of six, attached to each other by plastic rings.

Key Food had a red sign out front, the letters slanted like they were tired. Come to think of it, I never saw my mom yawn. She never had bags under her eyes. I knew she had Lancôme makeup underneath her bathroom sink, but I didn't connect the two, that the makeup might be used to cover something up instead of enhancing what was already there.





I loved that supermarket. I loved the dinginess of the floors, the low ceiling that made me feel bigger than I was. It was a comfort to see all my favorite cereals lined up neatly in rows, all my favorite mascots together on the shelves: Captain Crunch, Tony the Tiger, The Keebler Elves, Lucky the Leprechaun, Chef Wendell on the box of Cinnamon Toast Crunch, my favorite, and how he kind of looked like my Dad.

It was always the two of us at Key Food, me sitting in the cart, facing my mom, her hair a blonde bounce against her winter coat. I remember the rolling wheels, the jostle of returning a cart to the rest of its brethren, the crash of metal into metal, the frame of one sliding into another with force.

I remember the plastic grocery bags, the swish and crinkle, the countless bags of our past, how they lived in a kitchen drawer that got so full it eventually wouldn't open.

I remember boxes of Hershey's chocolate milk, the wheezing when the drink was finished, the milk turning to bubbles turning to air.

I remember pot roasts and cans of Spam and glass bottles of Ragu spaghetti sauce and how my mom wrapped her hand around each peach and squeezed to test its ripeness, how it couldn't be too hard, too soft.

We ate takeout most nights, but I loved when my mom cooked. I loved seeing how what she bought at the store came to life in a pan, in the oven. I watched noodles cook in a pot of boiling water and I waited for the smell of her teriyaki steak to waft from the oven.



Every Passover, my mom made latkes from scratch. The potatoes from Key Food were peeled and boiled and grated and fried into discs that we dipped in applesauce and sour cream.

Food is magic—how it becomes a string of memories, the story of a life.

When we moved to Florida, Publix was our new grocery store. When I was in college, it was Kroger in Bloomington, Indiana. In Los Angeles it was Ralph's, and then Vons, and then Pavilions and Whole Foods and Trader Joes and Gelson's. All these years, I've pushed carts down aisles and filled my life with meats wrapped in plastic and bread in bags and cereal in boxes. I've scanned the bundles of bananas for the perfect bunch. I've become brave enough to ask the butcher for a specific cut of steak, no, not that one, but the one right above it.

My whole life I've been calling my mom from the store, asking her for a recipe, asking her if she's had blood oranges, how long tuna *really* lasts in a can, asking her what to do about this and that and her voice coming from another state telling me what I want to hear. Often, we don't talk about food while we're both surrounded by it. Often, the conversation begins with simple ingredients and complicates itself like a simmering stew, the flavors blooming over time.

Sometimes she calls me while she's at the market and I imagine the baker slicing challah for her in the special machine that shakes the loaf and cuts it into slices. I imagine her checking the sell-by date on a container of Cantaloupe.

And now, I push my daughter in her stroller through the aisles, the same aisles I've traversed my whole life. My daughter sleeps as I pick out dinner, the hum of the supermarket emitting constant whir like the sound machine we keep in her room. I don't use a cart. I fit the produce and containers and plastic-wrapped things in the undercarriage of her stroller. I place each item gently so I don't wake her.

*Fin.*





# No more human

Aayushi Majumder

I've been going bald every day.  
Cancer-stricken grief, I grab a handful of hair and rip it like a lump of flesh;  
The ritualistic pain a bitter reminder of the present tied around my neck like a noose.  
Mother, do you remember the scratches on my face the day after I was born?  
Years later, those marks have subsided, unable to claw its way out of this skin.  
Hunger so insatiable that I throw up bits and pieces hoping to escape through my vomit—  
The pungent smell resembling the odor when I came into existence;  
A horizontal scar, the shape I pierce my pencil with into the paper to tear it through.

I've been following an all-meat diet for the last three weeks.  
Teeth marks all over my body—each bite a desperate attempt to regain my humanity;  
Rotten blood rusts on the tongue, my mouth a battlefield licking corpses of the times I've killed myself.  
Mother, do you remember the first time I burnt myself while making tea?  
And how the blisters looked like the dark birthmark on my hand—a premonition of destruction.  
Exhaustion wears my face like the coroner's coat, unable to wipe away the violence of reality.  
The weight of the world on my shoulders, I crumble beneath my nauseating essence—  
Between a desire to be much, and a prayer to cease my hollow vessel.

Tell me Prometheus, how does it feel to be eternally feasted on for a guiltless sin?  
How long until the nightmares stop, and I'm not haunted by this devouring madness?  
*Let me out, let me out, let me out, let me out, let me out.*



APPARITION  
V HOLECEK



VHOLECEK



2024, PHOTO  
COLLAGE ON  
FINE ART PAPER  
21 × 29 CM

WILD CREATURES  
JOONHEE MYUNG



# Intentionally Left Blank (Sin Título)

by Joonhee Myung

## I Am Not My Hair

*At dusk, a shadow dissolves into the dimness at precisely 6:58 PM. Time swells and slips, elastic and insubstantial. When night falls, the cries of tigers, wolves, and crows vibrate through mountains, fields, skies, and winds. Those who left were replaced by companion species—a lone wolf scaling the mountains, a tiger prowling the streets, a crow floating beneath moonlight. Darkness became my friend, eternal and intimate.*

*When my body quietly decays, forgotten by all, the wolf promises to carry me to a tree in the valleys of Inwangsan, where it will lay me down gently. I will return to the clouds, the winds, the stars. I never swung the wheel of fate, only circled endlessly, longing for those I loved. Time, infinite, finally halts with my last, quiet sigh of longing.*

*Dusk's violet haze settles heavily, thick with dust. Somewhere in the sullen downpour, a fleeting rainbow reveals the silhouettes of the ones I miss. As a tree's shadow, I embroider the path you tread, believing this binds us forever.*

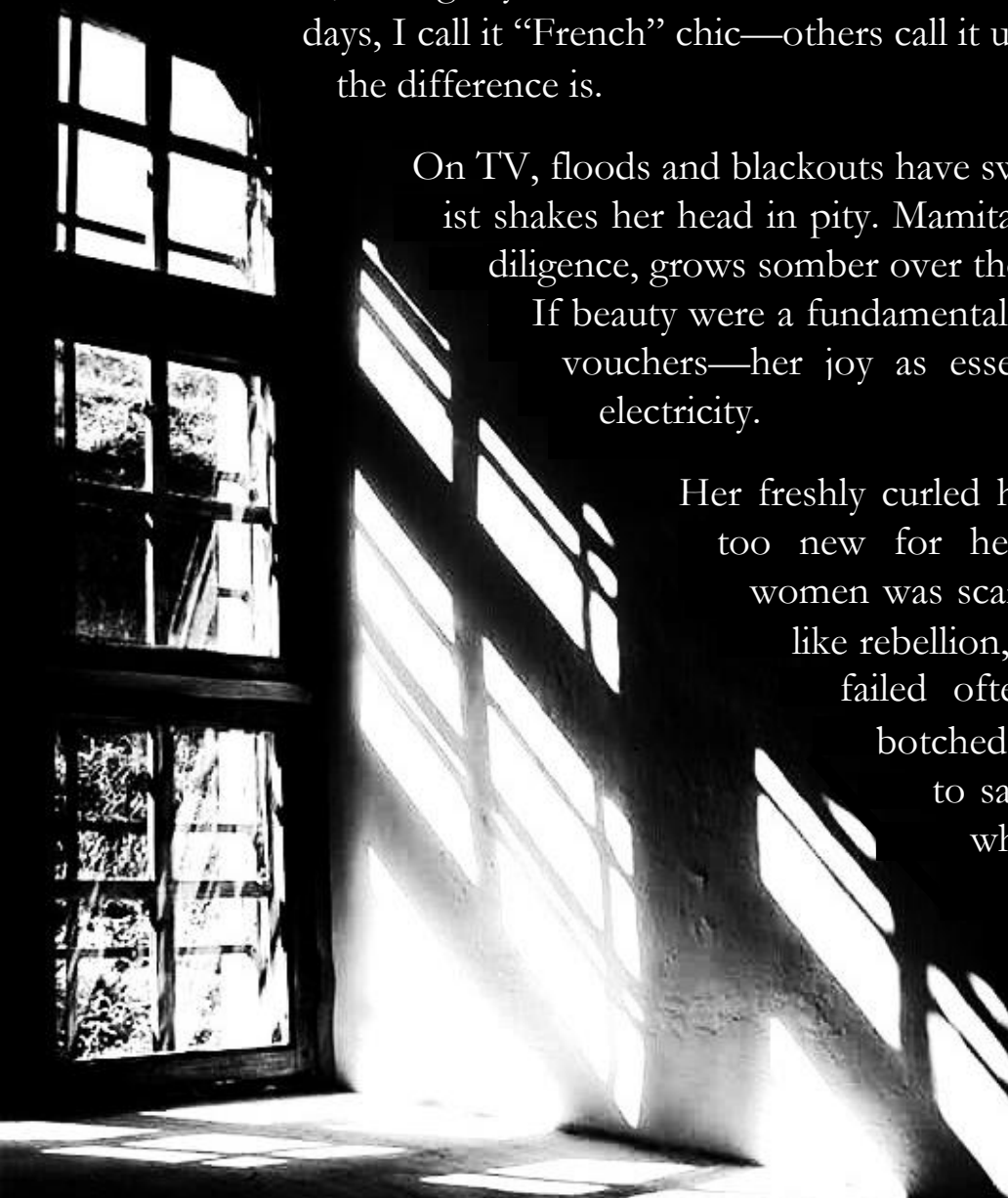


I wake in a room filled with the suffocating brightness of midday. 12:22 PM. A dream, a mere dream. In the mirror across from my bed, Mamita dozes under curling irons at the market salon. A local hairdresser, trusted and familiar, someone warm toward foreigners. “She’s kind, and the price is a fraction of Korean salons,” Mamita used to say. “They can’t manage Korean hair, but what can you do?” The stylist and Mamita talk with gestures, hands bridging the gaps in language. “Mi hija—my daughter,” Mamita beams through the mirror, motioning for me to greet the stylist. Groggy, I drag myself forward to kiss her cheek. “Thank you for taking care of Mamita’s hair.”

Salons have always felt foreign to me. The polished hair, tailored to perfection, seemed like a costume for other people. At home, I’d wash away their precision, letting my hair fall wild and natural. A comfort in disarray. These days, I call it “French” chic—others call it undone. I still wonder what the difference is.

On TV, floods and blackouts have swallowed a town. The stylist shakes her head in pity. Mamita, devoted to progress and diligence, grows somber over those robbed of basic rights. If beauty were a fundamental right, I’d gift Mama salon vouchers—her joy as essential as clean water and electricity.

Her freshly curled hair is too tight, too dark, too new for her. Once, short hair for women was scandalous. Cutting mine felt like rebellion, a plea for psychic relief. I failed often. My shaggy cuts and botched trims led me, desperate, to salons in university districts where fashion’s disciples gathered. “Why ruin perfectly good hair?” they’d ask. Walking into a salon meant exhaustion: resistance, persuasion, fatigue.



Now, it's Mamita urging me. "Long hair makes you look older. Cut it, daughter." My hair has always been a battleground. I fall back into dreams, clawing at peeling walls.

*A wolf's black eyes meet mine. A vibration shatters the silence: veins coursing, blood surging, the core of darkness pierced by radiant light. "Your blood reeks of histories: empires that devoured, nomads that wandered. Your stammering tongue, your wordlessness, are chains—ours to bear. You will live forever in this cave." The hammer in my hand strikes, but the walls hold firm.*

## Asian Flâneuse

To walk unseen, to glide through streets like a ghost—that is the flâneur's luxury. But I am no shadow here; my presence is like spilled ink on a white page, I disrupt the stillness. I am watched, weighed, measured. Fear coils at the base of my spine. What if I misstep? What if I invite danger by simply being?

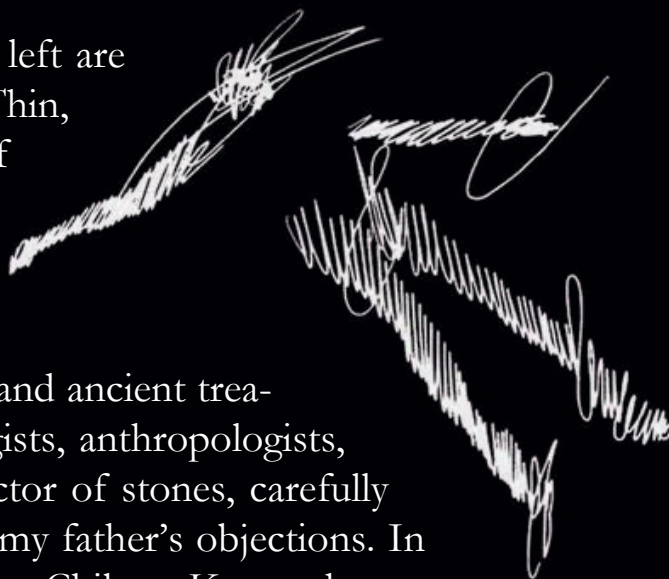
Some days, though, something shatters the distance. A vendor selling mote con huesillo grins and asks, "Do you know BTS?" Her eyes sparkle when I say, "Yes, RM and Jimin." She smiles. "J-Hope and V for me." A small moment, a miracle, a bridge of laughter spanning the unknown. Even so, I tread the margins, my feet pricking invisible lines, barriers that exist but cannot be seen. At 40, my strangeness still lingers, a whisper of otherness in every step. Yet, isn't it always about fear? The fear of rejection, of exile, of never quite belonging? Or maybe, just maybe, it is about love—the kind that holds steady in the face of uncertainty.

I hope for more small incidents, small miracles that show us how we're not so different after all. A love for Christmas, a childlike joy at the sight of snow, happiness in music, love for peace, the yearning to avoid war.



## Teeth, Skeletons, and Archaeology

When a person dies, even if all that's left are bones, those bones preserve stories. Thin, elongated bones whisper histories of migration, conquest, survival. A single fragment contains universes of possibility.



South America, with its rare minerals and ancient treasures, is a land beloved by archaeologists, anthropologists, and astronomers. My mother, a collector of stones, carefully brought them back to Korea, despite my father's objections. In the 1980s, transporting such items from Chile to Korea, then to a small, remote town was no simple feat. She carried them across oceans by boat, packed among our belongings in heavy suitcases. I was too young and uninterested to grasp the weight of what my mother carried. The history she cherished, the memories she preserved in each stone.

Now, they are scattered, dispersed with each move. Someone else might treasure these artifacts while I dismissed them too easily. And regret lingers.

As a child, I lived in a village so small the bus came once a day, the grocery store was nothing more than a shack. I call this place my heart's hometown. The elementary school, a single tiny building, felt vast.

One day, in a moment of carelessness, I used my baby teeth to cut the plastic tip of an ice pop. My front teeth shattered. Blood trailed all the way home. Thus began my painful entanglement with dentistry.

By the time we moved to Chile, then back to Korea, then to Russia, my teeth became records of fragmented healthcare systems. As an adult, financial independence brought its own constraints: I often skipped dental visits, relying on free clinics in emergencies.

Recently, a kind dentist told me, "Your teeth are strong, but they're not what they used to be. Take care if you want them to last fifty more years."



What will archaeologists say about my teeth? Worn down by sugar-laden foods, cracked from ice-chewing, uneven from years of neglect. They will study the stress fractures, note how chemical-laden civilizations affected me.

This inability to belong has shadowed my path.

*Protests fill my dreams. I wake to the clatter of pots and pans—cacerolazos breaking the night's silence, voices echoing against the walls of dictatorship. Women dance in defiance. Un Violador en Tu Camino goes viral. I want to join, to raise a spoon, a pan, but my body sinks heavier into bed.*

### **Kimchi and Marraqueta**

Childhood mornings demanded rice, soup, and kimchi. even if the kimchi was lettuce masquerading as napa cabbage. These days, with money, Korean food in Chile is no longer a fantasy, though napa cabbage remains rare and tiny. My mother complains, “Tell them to grow bigger ones next time.”



“You look so Korean,” a Korean-American friend once told me in Seoul. Yet, my childhood palate craves not just kimchi but empanadas, puré, marraqueta, and soup.

Memory tastes like these things.

*A sudden sandstorm erupts, swirling the world into a single, raging vortex.  
What remains is only the glow of constellations—  
the bed, the window frame, even the moon itself consumed into the storm's great spiral.*

*The whirlwind, having devoured all the waters of the earth, drenches the land,  
gently releasing a single leaf to the ground.  
I cling to its brittle edges, transparent, weightless, drifting through the streets.  
Past the asphalt veins of Seoul, across the endless plains of Mongolia,  
gliding over St. Petersburg's Neva River, the towering Andes of Peru,  
and at last, the solemn gaze of a Moai on Easter Island.*

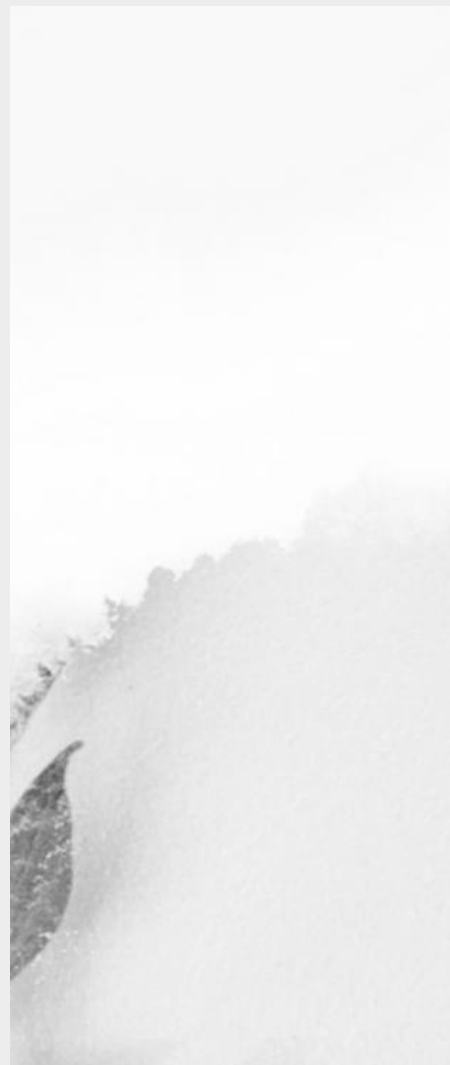
*The vortex, the wind, the sky—it all returns me to a single  
fragile leaf.*

*The leaf takes root in my body.*

*I become a tree.*

*A tree without roots.*

*Fin.*

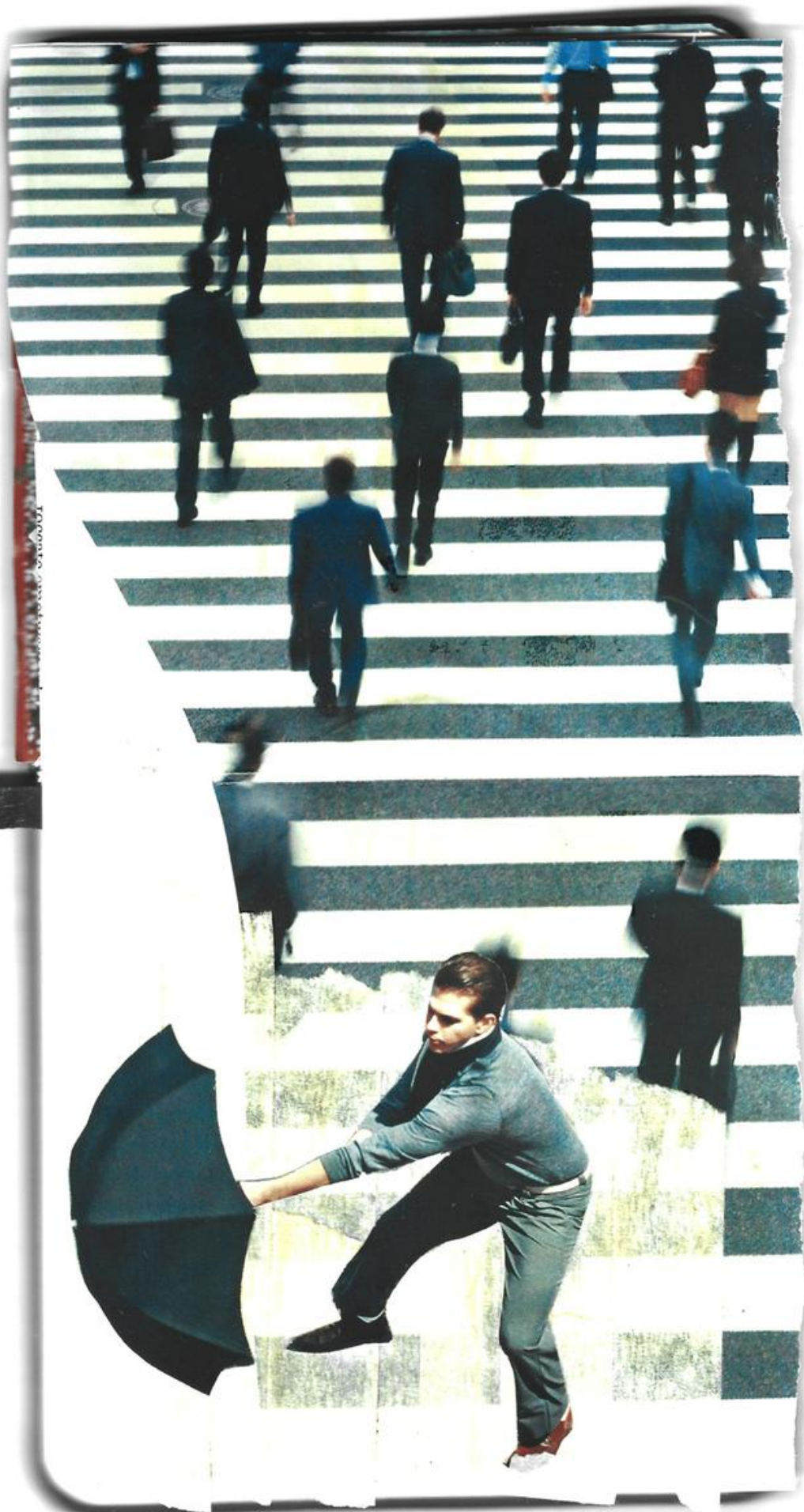


**ROOTLESS TREE**  
(2024) PHOTO  
COLLAGE ON  
FINE ART PAPER  
21 X 29 CM





GONE  
WITH  
THE  
WIND



SOFIA  
IDA  
CESTARI

ISABELLA ARP



SHEFFIELD RAIN (2024) 12" X 9" OIL ON PAPER

Capturing the urban loneliness of fresh rainfall and subsequent empty streets.



JUBILEE  
(2024)  
12" X 12"  
OIL ON  
GESSO  
BOARD

ISABELLA  
ARP

An undefined portrait, no context is further given within the background. Glazing mediums and thin layers of paint were utilized extensively to create an isolated, almost 'aquatic' atmosphere, in which direct eye contact with the subject is inevitable. The man is posed in the composition as if to pause his reading activities to attentively listen to the viewer in conversation.

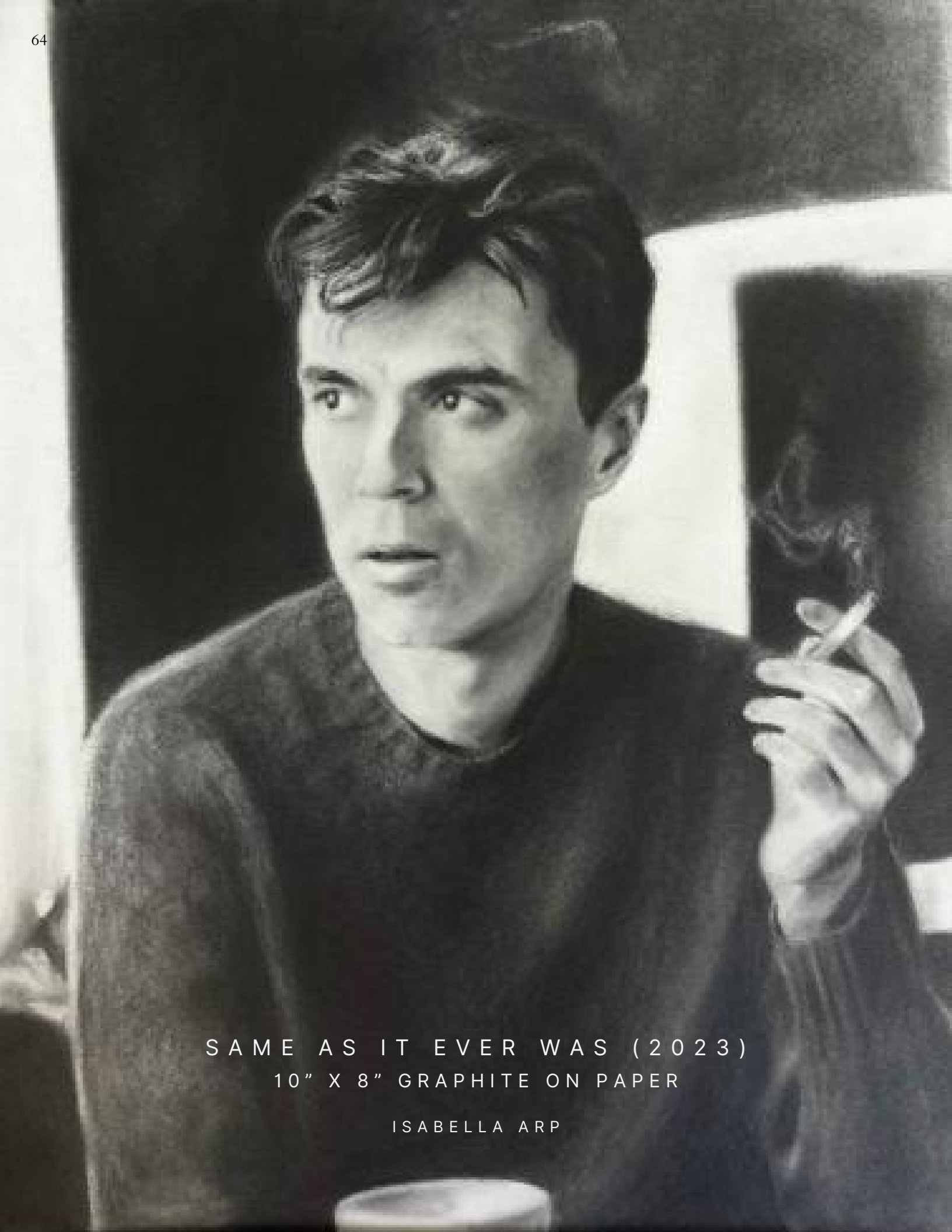


All components are present for the creation of software: an operating system manual, data storage media, and, most importantly, coffee. The diskette pictured in the painting is blank, holding the promise of containing documents, programs, and personal correspondence to one day be shared with others.

ISABELLA ARP

THE PROGRAMMER'S DESK (2024)  
12" X 12" OIL ON CANVAS





SAME AS IT EVER WAS (2023)  
10" X 8" GRAPHITE ON PAPER

ISABELLA ARP

# Coffee Shop with a Christian

by Jesse Simpson

**M**y mother sighs, “I’m worried about you, Jesse.”

Despite the unassuming coffee shop ambiance, I shuddered at my mother’s abrupt conversation starter. She loves lulling me into false security, this time offering to pick me up from an inconvenient car repair. I know she’s blindsiding me with yet another awkward discussion about my life choices. The presumption of a civil chat dissipates.

Visiting my family over the holidays only seems to lead to these uncomfortable encounters, and my mother has initiated this conversation multiple times. With acute accuracy, I can predict all of her reasons for being worried. First, she’ll complain about my lack of church attendance in my new hometown.





She has no way to know this, but she's infuriatingly correct. Second, mom will accuse my girlfriend, Sophie, of being the reason why I don't attend church anymore. This assumption is less informed, as I will later explain. My mother demeans my girlfriend's Jewish culture under the guise of a loving, protective mother. Mixing religious background is absolutely forbidden in her small-town, conservative bubble. My sole job during this break, as always, is to sneakily stealth around my mother's scathing confrontations. Her eternally rotating ball of anxiety must be appeased to maintain a congenial relationship. I must protect my real self while catering to the version of me that my mother still perceives.

"Is it the church thing again?" I respond calmly, trying not to provoke her further.

"Jesse," her eyes sparkling manically as if to infer her seriousness, "I'm being serious." I grip my vanilla latte, anticipating her oncoming storm. "You've been out there to visit me. The churches in Texas are just different than the ones—"

"That's not what I'm worried about," she interrupts, swiftly switching topics. We've already had the religion conversation twice this visit, so my mother likely knows that progress could be made with an alternative topic.

Honestly, I prefer her making religious assumptions to other ones; the religious ones are right, after all. I tell her that I attend church every Sunday, but it's transparent—it's a lie she sees through.

"It's just..." my mother drawls on in her slow southern accent, "I'm worried about you and Sophie."

No surprise there, another condemnation of my 'unequally yoked' relationship with Sophie, whom she has accused me of 'shacking up' with. She induces Old Testament terminology to distrust my relationship with my girlfriend. Once again, my mother is right. Her ball of anxiety rolls righteously. When I moved away from home, Sophie and I decided to live together. My mother even helped us move in. Still, she projects that Sophie is slowly poisoning my traditional Christian values. However, I can rest my laurels on the knowledge that it's not Sophie who caused my disillusionment with Chris-



tianity; that happened back in the dregs of high school. If anything, Sophie only encouraged my vocal disavowal of religion. Organized religion has driven this wedge between myself and my mother, accentuating my decision to move away from home, detach from church life, and detest Christianity.

“You’re always worried, Mom.” I return.

“You know what I mean,” she rambles, discontent that I am not properly acknowledging her concerns. “I just always prayed for you since you were a baby. A husband and wife need to be on the same page because...what if you have kids? You would believe in one thing and Sophie would believe in another and...it’ll confuse your kids, Jesse.”

Kids. Plural. This is a classic straw-man argument. Sophie doesn’t even want kids, and I concur. Having a child at twenty-four would be appalling. Neither of us have full-time jobs, job benefits, job security, or a desire to have children. Weighing down our twenties with a squalling, expensive baby would be difficult even if I wasn’t holding down two jobs. My mother does not deserve to know that she will likely never have a grandchild. This accumulation of my untraditional life choices would crush her. So, I divert like I always do.

“Well,” I enunciate carefully so she can follow my logic, “Sophie and I don’t want kids right now. We won’t even get married until...at least after she finishes vet school.”

“And you know my feelings on that,” my mother snaps, “It’s not right for you two to be shacking up if you haven’t made a vow before God. You’re spitting in His face.” This same, cyclical conversation used to plague my relationships. My relationship with my mother, my relationship with Sophie, and my relationship with myself. Now, nothing she says can bother me. If you’ve heard this story the amount of times that I have, it weakens with repetition. To me, living with Sophie before marriage is not a sin. Being raised around different cultures is not a sin. I love Sophie. That is not a sin.

“Does it even bother you?” My mom questions, “You don’t go to church, you don’t respect the commandments...it’s like you get further and further from God every day.” Here comes the waterworks, my mom almost sniffing with the last part of her sentence. Once again - How could she know which commandments I respect and don’t respect? Her emotional displays used to affect me greatly. Then I realized the manipulation oozing alongside her tears. Her tears are meant to harm our bond, not heal. My mother believes that her guilt trips will break me down. Then, I would simply break off the re-

lationship. I would move back home, get a different job, and find a traditional, Christian girl to settle down with. This life disinterests me, and I would be succumbing to my mother's version of Jesse.

"You don't know if I'm Christian or not." I state matter-of-factly, "There's nobody who can know except God, remember? The only reason you want to believe that I'm 'changing' or that I'm not Christian anymore is because I'm dating a Jewish girl."

This is one of the more confrontational statements I've made to my mother. Claiming that she cannot prove I am no longer a Christian may seem simple, but it furthers her emotional strife. It shows that her control over me has weakened. She deflates, unable to combat my logic without contradicting her beliefs.

"I've prayed..." my mother starts, wiping her eyes. "I've prayed that you'll find a wife one day who's a Christian because you both need to go to Heaven. I worry about eternity."

Oftentimes, I debate telling her the truth. The urge to let my mother into my real life is tempting. How beautiful would it be to eliminate the barrier between the two versions of myself? I first began disbelieving God in high school. The Biblical contradictions of God being both loving and jealous, strong-handed yet negligent, worried me. The fact that God eliminated his creations in a flood, tortured his most loyal servant, Job, and allowed his only son to be murdered gave me pause. Is that truly a being that I wanted to worship? Now, throw in all of his followers' beliefs: conservative gender norms, condemnation of queerness, anti-miscegenation, and moral grandstanding.

I learned in high school to despise Christianity and how it separates people. Now that I'm older, I see how it has separated me from my family. I want to tell my mother that I'm liberal. I yearn to tell her about my love for explicit music, political science, literary theory, and recreational drugs. Every conversation comes with a mask. Every conversation with my mother is a death of the real Jesse. I become meek and timid. I must obey her beliefs and adhere to them. If I do not, if I am not the loyal Christian that she still believes me to be, then I will go to Hell.

It's that simple. My mother fears that I will be damned for an eternity in a burning pit of flames. Honestly, I empathize with her. This is the sole reason that I cannot bear to tell her the truth. I'm not capable of such cruelty. I can-



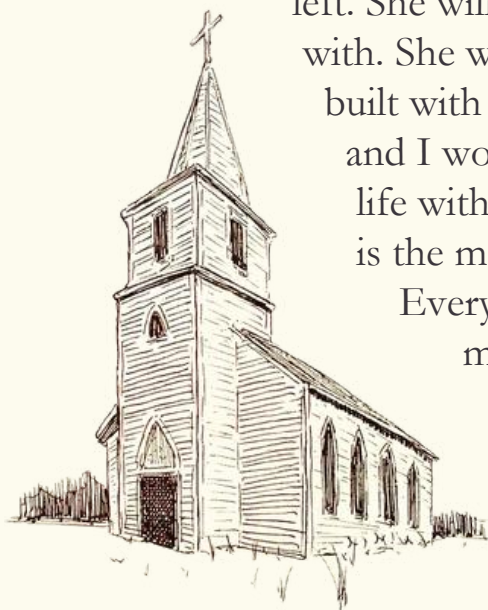
not confirm to my mother that I'm damned to Hell, or worse, that I don't believe in Hell. On one hand, that's her issue to deal with. On the other hand, it's my issue because I still lead her on. This is the woman who raised me into the man that I have become, even if it paradoxically resulted in the opposite of the man she wanted. I can never tell her the truth. She must spend her life believing I'll go to Heaven with her. Some might say it is equally cruel to lie to my mother, but I hold a different belief. To let her into my truth would be worse for both of us. It would invite more angst, questions, and conversations far more awkward than this one. Every waking interaction with my family would become a form of defense for myself. This is no way to live, and I know that the only conclusion is to cut my family off for the sake of my own mental health. Perhaps that is truly the most effective option. I've considered it greatly. Do I truly benefit from having my mother in my life if our relationship is built on falsehood? Is my love for her genuine, or am I a slave to familial expectation?

My phone buzzes with a call from the car repair company. With a rush of relief, I tell my mother that my car is ready. Her scowl lightens, but I can tell that she is not satisfied with the conversation. She never is. I consistently dodge her most direct talking points. My mask remains properly secured for our next spat. My mother always accepts when a battle is lost because she believes there is a war she can still win. She does not recognize that the war ended long before today. I will never succumb to her, and she cannot even anticipate the worst-case scenario.

If this tug-of-war continues, then there will be nothing left. She will not have the old Jesse or the real Jesse to argue with. She will have finally burned the bridge that believes she built with her bare hands. She would see me as the villain, and I would empathize with her loss. Alternatively, my life with Sophie will be far more peaceful and fulfilling. It is the most costly tradeoff I will ever make in my life.

Every time we talk I ask myself this question — Could my conscience survive betraying my own mother?  
The answer changes each day.

*Fin.*



# The First Edition

by Mark Keane

“H e’s up in the Mater,” Nicholas, the barman in Gaffney’s said when I asked if Benny had been in.

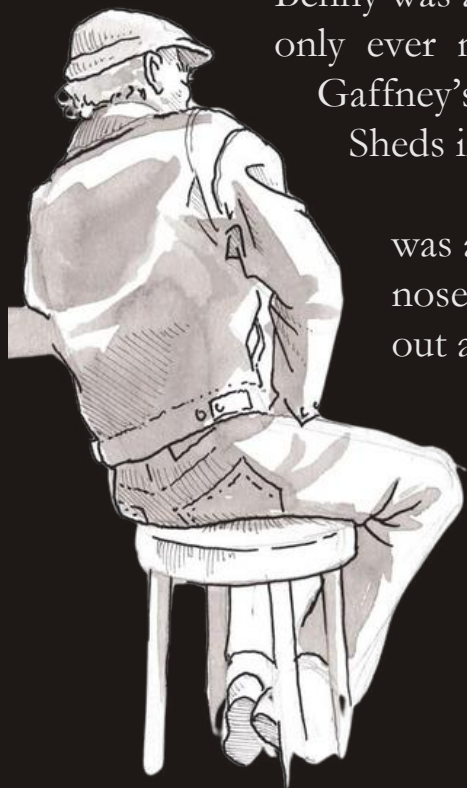
“What’s he doing in hospital? Is it serious?”

The regulars at the bar shrugged or shook their heads. No one had any idea what was wrong with Benny.

What about the first edition? Was it safe?

I’d have to go to the hospital and find out for myself.





Benny was an acquaintance, not what you'd call a friend. We only ever met in pubs, and never prearranged—usually Gaffney's, sometimes The Yacht, even as far afield as The Sheds in Dollymount.

Tom Bennett, known to one and all as Benny, was an electrician by trade. A small man with a button nose and curly black hair, he was always neatly turned out and well-known in North Dublin pubs.

What set Benny apart was his knowledge of James Joyce's *Ulysses*. There was no shortage of bar-room comedians and polemicists, but Benny stood out with his quotes from the great book and references to Leopold Bloom, Blazes Boylan, Punch Costello, and the rest of the cast. "History was a nightmare from which Joyce could not wake," he'd say with a knowing wink.

I sat in on lively discussions of possible routes across Dublin that didn't involve passing a pub. "As much a puzzle now as it was in Joyce's day," Benny liked to point out. I found myself drawn to his Joycean shtick. It was a better class of pub blather, but no more than that. I doubted Benny had any proper understanding of Joyce's masterpiece. It was one thing to quote a phrase here or a sentence there, even entire passages verbatim. It was another matter to truly grasp Joyce's wordplay.

Benny was popular with the unread boozers. They liked having him around and basked in the rays of enlightenment from James Joyce when filtered through one of their own—a man who knew his stuff when it came to *Ulysses*. "Jaysus," I often heard one or other of them say, "we should have been taught Joyce at school, and not all that Shakespeare shite."

I'd buy Benny a pint, the entrance fee to a conversation that could begin with football or politics but always came round to *Ulysses*. Occasionally, he brought up a detail from a story in *Dubliners* or an event from Joyce's school-days or his time in Trieste. If I strayed from the script by mentioning another writer, he'd steer us back to the tried and tested. "Beckett subtracted, but Joyce added," he might say, or "Joyce had no time for Thomas Hardy. He called him a poseur."



The novelty waned as everything he had to say was either banal or the hackneyed opinions of others.

“Joyce knew his immortality was guaranteed—that he’d keep the professors busy for centuries.”

Whenever I had enough of his patter, there was always some half-cut regular in the pub to take my place. “So Benny,” he’d say, “what would Joyce make of the current state of the nation?” I knew the response, could hear it ringing in my ears as I made my escape. “A nation? As Bloom said...”

One day, Benny surprised me. “I was looking at my first edition today,” he said, “rereading the *Eumaeus* episode.”

“What do you mean?” I butted in. “You own a first edition *Ulysses*?”

“I do—published in 1922,” he replied, as though it was a matter of no consequence. A first edition had to be worth a fortune.

“What condition is it in?” I asked.

“As good as new. What’s more, it’s signed by Joyce himself.”

Benny explained that he inherited the book from an uncle who had lived in France. “My uncle was a jack of all trades,” he said. “At one point he worked for a removals company in Paris. He shifted Joyce’s belongings, and you know how often he moved around. When it came to payment, of course Joyce was strapped for cash. Instead, he dipped into a box and pulled out the *Ulysses* that he signed on the spot.”

It sounded like a tall tale, but Benny never struck me as someone who made up stories. If nothing else, he didn’t have enough imagination.

I trawled the internet and read reports of sales of *Ulysses* first editions in London and New York. *A thing of beauty, one dealer wrote, bound in blue morocco with the finest Dutch handmade paper.*

Whenever the first edition came up, Benny stuck to his story.

“Did your uncle ever read the book?” I asked.

“No, not a word, but he knew its worth.”

“And did he have anything to say about Joyce?”

“A very lively man, always talking about Dublin.”

“Where do you keep the book?”

“It’s in a safe place,” he said. “In a box under the bed.”

More than once I said I’d be interested in seeing it, but Benny let on he didn’t hear me. He never invited me to his place. I knew he lived in a bedsit in Marino, asked around and got his address.



I made it into the Mater with half an hour to spare before visiting hours ended. Skeletal figures in bathrobes clustered around the lobby, staring through sunken eyes. Blue uniformed nurses rushed past as I waited at the reception desk. I read the notices about measles and alcohol abuse, but my mind was busy working out the best way to bring up the subject of the first edition.

Nothing prepared me for the sight of Benny propped up in bed in the crowded ward. He had lost a lot of weight, accentuated by his striped pyjamas. His dull eyes showed no sign of recognition as I approached his bed.

“Fancy seeing you here.” I tried to sound cheery.

Benny wheezed, his mouth half-open and shapeless. Tubes ran up one arm and into his nose. His skin had a yellow tinge.

I put two newspapers on top of his locker. I didn’t know what to bring and couldn’t in good conscience arrive empty-handed. Flowers were out of the question, and I didn’t think he was one for grapes. I bought the papers at a stand outside the hospital gates.

“Terrible news about Paddy Dignam.” I had decided to start the ball rolling with a reference to *Ulysses*.

“Poor Dignam.” Benny cocked an eyebrow, showing a spark of his old self. “If The Citizen was here, he’d ask you to hand over your valuables.”

I laughed my encouragement. No matter how sick he was, it hadn’t put a stop to his *Ulysses* hokum.

I scanned the newspaper headlines for inspiration, and said something about the increase in the price of the pint in the budget. I asked about the hospital food. Benny closed his eyes. I thought he had fallen asleep and moved closer. He looked up and appeared confused, then agitated as though surprised to see me.

“Before we know it, Bloomsday will be around again,” I said.

“I suppose so.”

“This time, we must go to The Palace for our gorgonzola and burgundy.” I felt the vacant stares of the other patients. “It won’t be long before we have to dust off the Boaters.” The bag of bones in the next bed looked at us pityingly. Benny had dropped off again. There was a chair left against a wall. I brought it over to his bed, sat and watched over him. He was wasting away.

It had to be cancer. Seeing him like this made me feel lousy about what I'd said to him that night. The memory was still vivid—sitting across from him in Gaffney's, the cracked vinyl against my back. I had been in a foul mood, but Benny took no notice, too busy ploughing his own furrow.

"There's no greater gift a man can give a woman than his thoughts. And on that score, James Joyce trounces everyone else. If he had little in the way of readies, he had no shortage of ideas. The man brushed mountains of literary crumbs from his plate, words that could constitute many works of distinction. And this genius decided to fix his great work on the day he met the woman who was to be his partner for life. What greater gift can there be from such a man of letters? Whatever his indiscretions, Joyce dedicated the sweat of his intellect to Miss Nora Barnacle."

I had heard it all before, word for word, the same overblown delivery; Professor Tom Bennett, Gaffney's Chair of Joyce Studies, giving his lecture. Watching him suck on the pint I'd bought, I regretted the hours wasted listening to this guff.

"The sweat of his intellect." The contempt in my voice filled my head, driving me on. "What would you know about his intellect? Have you even read Joyce?" The red-hot certainty burned in me that I had to sort him out, and that I had right on my side. "You're a chancer. You've no idea what any of it means."

I avoided Gaffney's after that. When I finally went back, I found Benny sitting in his usual spot. He appeared to ignore me, but I was imagining it. Benny never had to greet people. They came to him.

"How are things?" I asked.

"Same as ever."

"I see they're putting on *Exiles* at the Abbey."

"Plays were not Joyce's forte."

"Will you have a pint?"

"Ah, the sacred pint."

I had intended to offer some sort of an apology, telling him I didn't mean what I'd said. In the end, there was no need to say anything. Benny trotted out his clichés about Joyce and Ulysses as though nothing had transpired between us.

The sound of coughing and spluttering dragged me back to the hospital ward. A wizened specimen in one of the beds hawked up sputum into a plastic



cup. Benny slept. There were no *get well* cards or anything to suggest he had any visitors. Nothing but the newspapers I brought. I'd never seen him with a woman, and none of the pub chatter connected him with a wife. Benny fell into the category of perpetual bachelor. Nor was there any sign of his clothes. I would have to ask one of the nurses where they kept his things.

I gave the bed a nudge. He opened his eyes to unveil a glassy stare.

"I hope the *Ulysses* is safely stowed away while you're in here. You wouldn't want it getting into the wrong hands."

He raised a hand to no apparent purpose and let it drop.

"Do you want me to go round to your gaff and check on things?" Even though I lowered my voice, I still sounded too loud.

Benny groped haphazardly at the bedclothes, edging pathetically from side to side as he tried to raise himself higher in the bed. I leaned over, lifted and rearranged the pillows. He smelled of disinfectant.

"Your common thief has no interest in James Joyce."

I was thrown by his sharp tone. "All the same, you have to be careful with such a precious commodity."

He must have told others. When Benny was well jarred, he was bound to have crowed about his first edition to the boozers in Gaffney's, but I doubted any of them would have been interested.

"This town is full of unscrupulous bowsies. What does it say in *Ulysses*? We walk through ourselves, meeting robbers and ghosts...?"

"But always meeting ourselves."

I had to hand it to him; he could quote from the book. He knew the text, but it was automatic, by rote, and didn't go any deeper.

I bent down and opened the locker, which was empty. Benny's chest rose and fell with the strain of living. Could he really have a signed first edition?

A nurse entered the ward. "Visiting time is over," she announced.

I took one of the newspapers and left.



It was a dirty night. The street lights illuminated sheets of rain. Benny's bedsit occupied part of the basement of a red-bricked Georgian house. I let myself in with the key I'd gotten from the nurse.

There was the stale smell of cigarettes and fry-ups and the unmistakable mustiness of mould. I flicked a switch, and a low wattage bulb in a tasselled shade cast weak light from the ceiling. The striped wallpaper was peeling and spotted with creeping damp.

I couldn't see a bookcase or any books. Piles of newspapers were stacked by the door. The threadbare carpet had faded to caliginous grey. The kitchen in one corner included a small fridge and ancient cooker. An assortment of plates and cups sat in the drying rack by the sink. Seashells were scattered on the mantelpiece beside a small ship-in-a-bottle. Two bottles of Heineken stood on a table with a bottle opener, ashtray, and loose change.

A fold-down bed took up one side of the room. Plastic containers held folded jumpers and underclothes. A suit and some shirts hung from a rod screwed into the wall. The flat was tidy but grim. Benny lived hand-to-mouth, surviving on odd jobs that came his way from pub customers.

I lifted the bed. Underneath was a shoe-box with a label: brown leather, size 8. I remembered the nurse putting a pair of brogues to one side as she searched through Benny's things for his keys.

A door slammed, followed by the sound of footsteps. Someone shouted. I stood rigid, holding my breath, the room unnaturally still. More shouting came from next door. Cars passed outside, the *whoosh* of tyres on wet tarmac. I thought of Benny dying in the hospital.

The box contained crumpled translucent paper arranged around a hard-covered book. Not blue morocco but gold leaf on red in a Celtic design, gilt-edged pages with a ribbon page marker. Even in the dim light, I recognised it immediately. I had the same version, won it in a competition years ago. It was part of a classic literature series, and I hated everything about it: the cheap extravagance and tawdry illustrations. The inside page bore the signature of Thomas Bennett.

There was no first edition. Benny had cheated me—taken me for a ride. I paced the flat, groaning and talking to the walls.

“Christ, what a joke. What a sad joke.”

I wanted to kick or punch something, but there was nothing to kick or punch. All that stuff Benny had spouted; *a man of genius makes no mistakes...the longest way round is the shortest way home*; he was a parasite, using the words of James Joyce to build a bogus status among people who cared nothing for the writer or what he wrote. I was right to call him a chancer, to say it to his face.

My mistake had been to put up with him for so long, to have ever given him the time of day.

I stopped pacing and stood, staring at the mould on the wallpaper. My anger dissipated as there was nothing here to sustain it, not the seashells or the folded bedclothes or the cushion Benny used as a pillow.

What was it he'd said? *There's no greater gift from such a man of letters.* Were they even his own words?

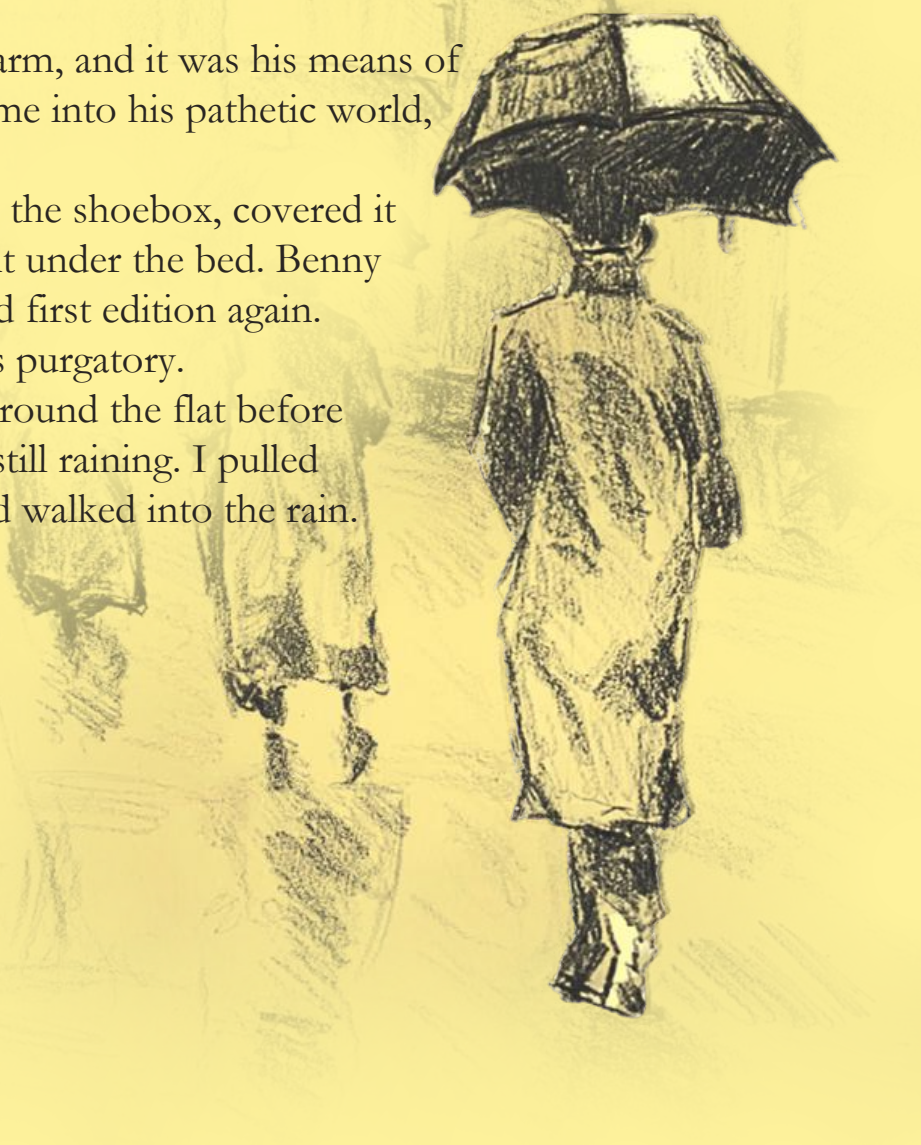
I pictured him returning from the pub to this drab room. Christ, what a life. The real world stopped at the front door of Gaffney's. A pint or two, a quote from *Ulysses*, gilding the lily, claiming to own a first edition. The misery of his existence relieved by the treasure he kept under the bed.

Maybe he meant no harm, and it was his means of escape, but he had dragged me into his pathetic world, and I resented that.

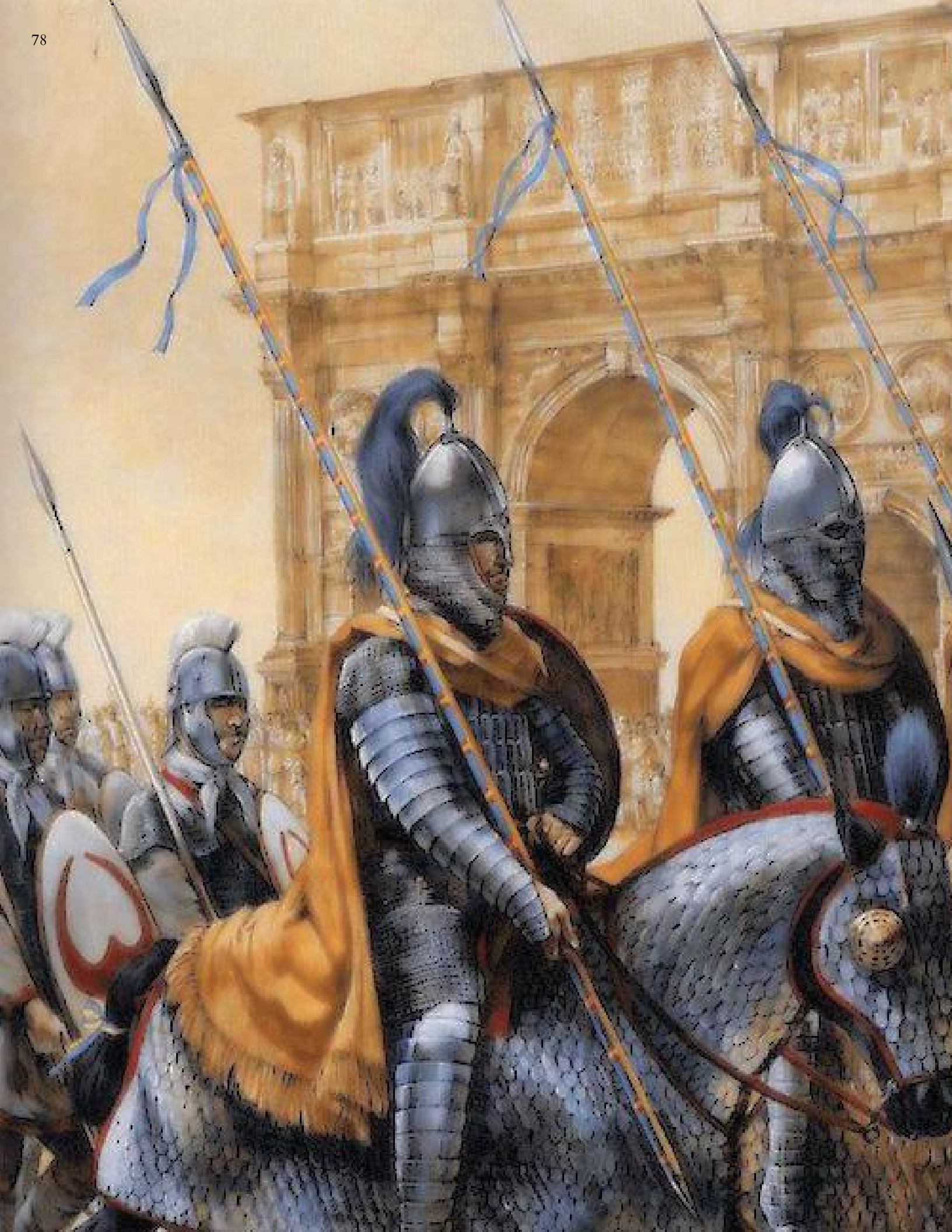
I put the book back in the shoebox, covered it with the paper, and shoved it under the bed. Benny wasn't likely to see his signed first edition again. He was better off out of this purgatory.


I took one final look around the flat before turning off the light. It was still raining. I pulled my coat tight around me and walked into the rain.

*Fin.*







An illustration of Roman soldiers in the background, wearing helmets and carrying spears, standing in front of a stone building.

# An Unyielding Monument

by Barlow Crassmont

**F**rom a hazy distance, the cavalry looked substantial enough. Flashy and polished, as if it was escorting the Emperor himself.

*Finally!* Hadrian Draco thought. *I'll shake the man's hand, and my life's purpose will be complete.*

He watched the incoming dust cloud with anticipation bordering on frantic. The closer the cavalry got, the faster his heart beat, its rhythm mirroring the clip-clopping of Arabian horses that pulled the carriage towards him. Draco would soon be face to face with the greatest Roman who ever lived. What would he say? Would it matter? No one would believe him. Not his wife Tullia, not her three sisters (Balbina, Valeria and Agnes), nor her disapproving parents (Patrin and Luno), who endlessly claimed their daughter “could’ve done better than marrying a road builder, a commoner who slaved under merciless skies year-round—come rain, sleet or shine—and who hardly contributed to raising a family,” despite the monetary benefits he sent them every month.



As sweat gathered on his brow, Draco glanced at his battered hands, covered with blisters and calluses long and wide, red and blue. He winced when picking up the leathery canteen, barely able to pour a drop down his throat before dropping the bottle to the dirt.

*How could I grace the Emperor's magnificent fingers with these crumbling mitts? He's bound to take offense.*

The scorching sun had turned Draco's aging face even more leathery than it had been weeks ago, when the legionnaires began constructing the road's extension for the Empire. *It's a four-year project, they said. When you complete it, you will be a national hero. With these pathways, our army will have an upper hand over any enemy daring to sneak up on us.*

"He won't forget the sacrifices you've made," foreman Adrian said to Draco, a sentiment that rang true on hot days when fresh air was more welcome than meals infested with rogue maggots crawling over stale bread. In his first year of leadership (second only to the foreman), Draco had earned the respect of not only the legion soldiers, but also the volunteers who toiled for a cause greater than themselves.

*All hail Emperor Severus! On your knees, slaves and laborers. Bow and show your allegiance!*

The chariot came to an abrupt halt, kicking up even more dust into the eyes of the faithful. The battered workers, covered in dirt and dried blood, bent the knee unanimously. But looking upward, it wasn't the Emperor's face that their weary eyes met. The person who exited the carriage was younger, thinner than a famished tree, his lips as red as strawberries, and his flesh more pale than a bucketful of milk.

*What is this? Has the Emperor reversed his age? This is but a child, and hardly the ruler of the greatest Empire known to man.*

"Gods be with you, laborers of Rome," the youth said, in a voice higher than the midday sun. "The Emperor sends his regards, but alas, he's been held up due to his daughter's wedding." *Daughter? I didn't know he had one.*

"He's sent over three cases of the finest wine from his darkest and deepest cellars. The Emperor hopes to share the next glass with you, and will be toasting to your honor during his upcoming meals." A trio of legionnaires car-



ried out said cases from the back of the carriage and placed them in the shade next to the battered tent. A mild applause ensued, followed by muted thanks, then an adieu by the Emperor's messenger. The carriage's departure left an even bigger cloud of dust on the workers' faces than the one that preceded their arrival. The cases of wine, meanwhile, soon vanished, and not a drop was ever consumed by the beaten road builders.

*The Emperor is a man of his word. He'll be here at some point, I'm sure of it.*

Days passed with the swiftness of minutes, and weeks blew by like hours. Before long, Draco and his three dozen fellow diggers toiled like ants before winter solstice, and found themselves well past the scheduled forty-eight months' planned completion of their project. The paved road, stretching from Pannonia to Noricum, was only one-third finished. Foreman Adrian was perpetually shaking his head as he read a recently arrived letter sporting a red imperial stamp. The laborers knew his ticks all too well, and dreaded the scolding that would inevitably follow.

"We're lagging behind," he said. "If we don't finish this by next year's conclusion..."

"But we've been working sixteen-hour days, with barely two solid meals in our bellies," Dominic said. "Last year, we lost Edoardo to heat exhaustion, Longinus to diphtheria, and several more to tuberculosis. Our initial three dozen are down to barely twenty-five. And the weather hasn't cooperated in the least."

"Yes, but the Emperor has sent plenty of gifts, drinks and feasts in gratitude."

"None of which any of us consumed," old Valerian said, his back more arched than an uppercase C. "Those cases vanish before we ever lay eyes on them. Funny how no one's ever the wiser afterwards." He shrugged sarcastically, and the offensive gesture was met with furrowed brows from the disrespected foreman.

Valerian's boldness was rewarded with a gruesome midnight whipping. His screams echoed, painful howls landing on his workmen's ears like audible lashes slashing their inner cochleas. The superiors left him on the brink of death, indifferent and cold to his suffering. The moon shone its blue tint upon Valerian's parched lips, and had any of his fellow colleagues mustered enough courage to sneak him a cup of water and wetten his drying throat, perhaps he

would've survived to rebel another day.

But Madam Destiny was indifferent—a cruel mistress. She instilled unimaginable fear into the weary workers, rendering them useless when it came to aiding one of their own. Overwhelmed by the cruelty of his masters, as much as his advancing years and the merciless weather, Valerian passed during the night. He was buried at dawn, his random, decrepit tomb illuminated by a feeble morning sun that turned oppressive before his colleagues' mourning prayer had properly left their lips.

*Rest in peace, audacious brother. We can only pray to someday possess your fearlessness.*

Time passed. The remaining workers—all thirteen of them—continued to toil, on and on, from sun-up to sun-down. Some died weekly from malnutrition, exhaustion, or the unwillingness to labor—especially so pointlessly—and more were brought in to replace them. More of the Noricum-to-Pannonia road was constructed. Yard by yard, kilometer by kilometer, large chiseled dark stones were embedded into the dugouts, then dotted with tiny white stones at the corners—like minuscule diamonds reflecting moonlight, serving to guide those on foot or horseback who came upon them when visibility was poor. With the path three-quarters complete, Draco was glad to receive praise from the new foreman, Novian (Adrian had succumbed to malaria the year prior).

“The Emperor may not be thrilled the road is still incomplete, but he is wise enough to know you’ve done as well as you could, under the circumstances.” Novian said, his nodding accompanied by a sly smirk.

“Will his presence be gracing our site?” Draco asked, barely able to keep his excitement at bay.

Novian nodded. “He will be arriving the day after tomorrow, just before sundown.” *So it's finally happening! Several years later, but still. Can't complain, for when an immortal embraces a commoner, it's equivalent to lightning grazing earth!*

The day of the Emperor's arrival came. The skies, meanwhile, were grayer than burned ash. Any eyes that encountered their bleak appearance soon shed tears indistinguishable from the raindrops that would follow. When the royal car-

riage pulled up, the horses' trotting sprayed mud every which way, and the workers' bewilderment left their jaws hanging—especially when an old woman, her wrinkled skin resembling the parched earth around them, exited the carriage. She waited extensively before speaking; her prolonged silence only served to escalate the builders' anxiety.

“Greetings, fellow Romans,” she growled at length. “The Emperor sends his regards, but is unable to be here, due to unexpected warfare against ominous invaders in the northwest. Nevertheless, he promises to be here by the year’s end, to embrace each and every one of you for your contribution to Rome and its dominion.”

*Oh.*

Draco would’ve loved to form another thought—to question, to critique, perhaps to oppose; but among his ceaseless exhaustion of late, along with his carpal tunnel and tennis elbow syndrome having gotten the better of him, he merely sighed, shrugged, and lay down on the rock-hard bedding. He remained awake, fidgeting, a growling belly aiding his insomnia. The discomfort lasted several hours, until he met the incoming dawn with eyes more weary and red than a pair of rotten cherries.

More time passed. Years went by, and road laborers passed on in larger numbers than they were being replaced. Younger men were brought in, and, not entirely aware of the responsibilities required of them, either deserted the project (they were later caught and executed accordingly), or requested a transfer (the ensuing denial of said transfer gave them little choice but to ultimately desert—the outcome of which was familiar). Of the original three dozen nearly two decades prior, only nine laborers remained—all elderly, severely beaten by age, ravaging weather, toiling labor, and spines as bent as branches holding onto excessive snow during wintertime.

*Four years, they said. It’s been over eighteen, and the road is still incomplete. My wife has long since stopped writing, and of the rest of my family, I know little—if anything.* Draco’s advanced years had seen his hair turn silver, his beard more salt than pepper in abundance. His current reflexes could only be described as “leaving much to be desired.” *I can move and meander about, but it’s not what it used to be. Nothing is what it used to be—except the emperor’s empty promises.*

Draco and the remaining six workers toiled on the last four miles of the road, resembling a horde of the undead on their way to purgatory. They dug, scooped, carried large stones, lowered them into place, then repeated the pro-



cess, ad nauseam. In terms of nourishment, they were reduced to musty porridge, rotten veggies, and clumps of bread harder than the rock they would chisel during downtime.

“Good news, laborers,” foreman Otho said. “Guess who’ll be gracing your presence in all their gratitude next week?”

Draco and his subordinates were too exhausted to verbally respond, despite their brain’s ability to decipher the question. They’d heard it all before. Not just once, but several times.

But it may as well have been a thousand. *It’s just words, and words are as inconsequential as an autumn breeze, as insignificant as an ass passing gas.* To Hadrian Draco, the announcement was a final blow.

The sight of infinite stars in the glossy cosmos above, twinkling like countless fireflies, enveloped him with a tranquility he’d never felt, but one he’d unknowingly been waiting for for nearly two decades. His body began to twitch, writhe, and soon succumbed to a convulsion that left him in a state of extended epilepsy. He shook and trembled, a helpless eel on dry land, before ultimately taking his last—a grin stretching from ear to ear on his battered face.

When a colleague, Gallio Venator, found him just before dawn, he mistook his state for slumber. He kicked Draco gently at first, then harder, eventually rolling him over with his foot. The man could only cover his mouth (and nose) at the revelation that the one he respected so much had defecated himself upon expiring.

“May he rest in eternal peace,” Gallio uttered to himself. “If there is any justice, the road will bear his name, come what may.” He suggested as much to foreman Otho, and to the remaining workers. They agreed instantly, each warmly patting Gallio on the back for the idea.

“If it wasn’t for Draco, this road would not have stretched a hundred meters from its origin, back in Pannonia. He was the last of the original bricklayers. We’ll give him a burial worthy of his dedication to the Empire.”

Otho kept his word. A proper grave was dug, deep and rectangular as an oversized coffin fit for two. Four workers lowered Draco’s corpse, neatly wrapped in a white cloak, as gently and cautiously as if it were made of glass. Prayers were recited, and a brief hymn sung; a longer psalm might have followed if the singer (Arruns Insteius, a former novice cleric with a voice softer than an angel’s) hadn’t been interrupted by a carriage abruptly stopping

just behind the burial.

Dust swirled once again, horses neighed nervously, and the carriage door creaked worse than several metallic gates of the coliseum's dungeons.

A lavish man, dressed in a spotless toga embroidered in gold, disembarked. He squinted from the bright sun, before laying his eyes on the long, polished road. It stretched far and distant, bringing a smile to the ruler's long, grandiose face.

"Greetings, fellow Romans," the man said. "I'm Octavian, current ruler of your empire."

The men instantly knelt, bowing their heads in unison.

"Please, rise," Octavian said. "Tell me, which of you is the foreman?"

Otho raised his hand and, upon being motioned over by the sovereign, slowly approached.

"You're running behind, from what I understand," Octavian said.

"A little, your Grace."

"A little?" Octavian chuckled. "I like a man with a sense of humor. Still, I realize this was no easy task. Grueling, strenuous work it must have been. I commend you all for what you've done. Lesser men would have quit—or worse yet, succumbed to cowardly, spineless deaths."

"Thank you, your Grace," Otho said. The other workers echoed his sentiments, their gratitude manifested with clasped hands held in front of their mouths.

"Tell me, do you have a name in mind?"

"A name, your Grace?"

"What is the road to be called?" Octavian asked.

"Funny you should ask, your Grace. Just prior to your arrival, we were tal—"

"The name should be impactful. Unforgettable, meaningful—rousing, even. When Romans speak of it, they should be reminded of our Empire's greatest men. It'd be a shame to name it after a commoner, some deceased foreman, or a former builder, be they alive or dead."

Otho swallowed, then glanced at his workers, hoping to find solace in their eyes. But they looked away, avoiding his stare like the plague, directing their eyes downward toward the mundane dirt and Octavian's gold-colored sandals. *It's one thing to plan and want something for the greater good, but it's a different matter altogether opposing the ruler's antithetical wishes.*

“Yes, your Grace,” Otho, at length, said. “You speak wisely.”

“Ah, so you agree?” Octavian said. “Good.”

“We’re all in agreement, your Grace.” The rest of the workers nodded reluctantly, bobbing their heads like random wobblers.

“I’m glad. Now, about that name...here’s what I’m thinking...”



The Octavian Road connected routes of trade and commerce across the Roman Empire for the next hundred and forty-seven years.

Merchants, farmers, craftsmen, knights, centurions, bedouin travelers from the African deserts, and samurai warriors from the Far East all made use of Octavian Road in their journeys to pay respects to the greatest ruler in the Western Hemisphere. But such trekking, alas, came at a price to the overused infrastructure. Hooves of countless horses, thousands of camel’s feet, wooden wheels, and heavy iron carts chipped away at the once-famous road like pickaxes set on eternal mode.

By 336 A.D., whatever remnants remained of Octavian road had been scattered by wild winds and random breezes all the way north to lower Britannia (as some have claimed).

The only remnant of its existence was a peculiar grave. Solitary as an immovable rock, it sat undeterred by merciless gusts of time, protruding out of the barren earth like a half-formed womb. On the shoddy cross that stuck out of it, the initials were visible: H.D.

I’m told the decrepit shrine sits there to this day, a somber reminder that true prominence endures everything and all—even a once-upon marvelous kingdom that was supposed to outlast time itself.



*Fin.*





# A Manly Monologue on Hate

Nattie O'Sheggzy

Whose hands lit the powder keg's fuse?  
Who eased open the door to this ruse?  
What tinder kindled this all-inclusive fire?  
So we need gather the ashes of our castle.

What whipped the mob to a frenzy?  
Who drove saints to insurgency?  
How deep was the darkened pond's mire?  
So we need gather the ashes of our castle.

How went caution to the howling wind?  
What made order aghast and chagrined?  
At the inferno lapping the keg's wire,  
So we need gather the ashes of our castle.

How cancerous is the foul wound,  
Dealt on our hearts by hate marooned,  
At the wastelands of desire?  
So we need gather the ashes of our castle.

When love with hatred confounds,  
Lay still till small grace abounds,  
In conducts Patience sets afire;  
So we must gather the ashes of our castle.

# [The eye is like a mirror: guilty in the end]

*after Margaret Atwood*

Jess Rush

*Madame, Madame, taxi?*

*T'habites où?*

*Banlieues?*

*Madame?*

*Tu m'écoutes?*

*Tu me laisses ton numéro?*

*You are American? I'll be your first. You just watch. Soon you love me.*

*Hello?*

*Pute.*

Has there ever been a man who didn't want to kill?

Between the girl and the metal, there is only the eye.  
Demands cast like fishing twine.

But this poem—his poem—is salt on my tongue,  
licked from my wound,  
a strange gift he gives me.

Margaret, are you ashamed of me?  
I never learned another way to hear the hunger:  
my body, the dinner bell.

Rhyme softened to swallow  
in my own throat: sharpened to kill

is it a poem or a question or a weapon—my body  
Twist it a little, and even I can see

?

hook—sink—bleed

Margaret  
I am ashamed of me

# Zelenskyy Unfurled the Flag

Ted Millar

To republicans poised to reclaim the House majority,  
threatening military aid to Ukraine,  
it's just a flag some scrappy soldiers  
in Bakhmut signed like a football jersey.

But to those who don't want to ever hear  
Vladimir Putin declare victory  
over stolen territory, it's Volodymyr Zelenskyy  
leaning across an ocean, 300 days  
after shelling and strife began beleaguering his nation,  
toward the first female Speaker beside  
the first female vice president—  
forming a heroic couplet for history's rhyme.

It's land and sky inscribed in our vernacular,  
as Europe had been for the Greatest Generation  
that defeated fascism.

It's democracy, unfurled, furrowed, yearning  
to breathe independently.



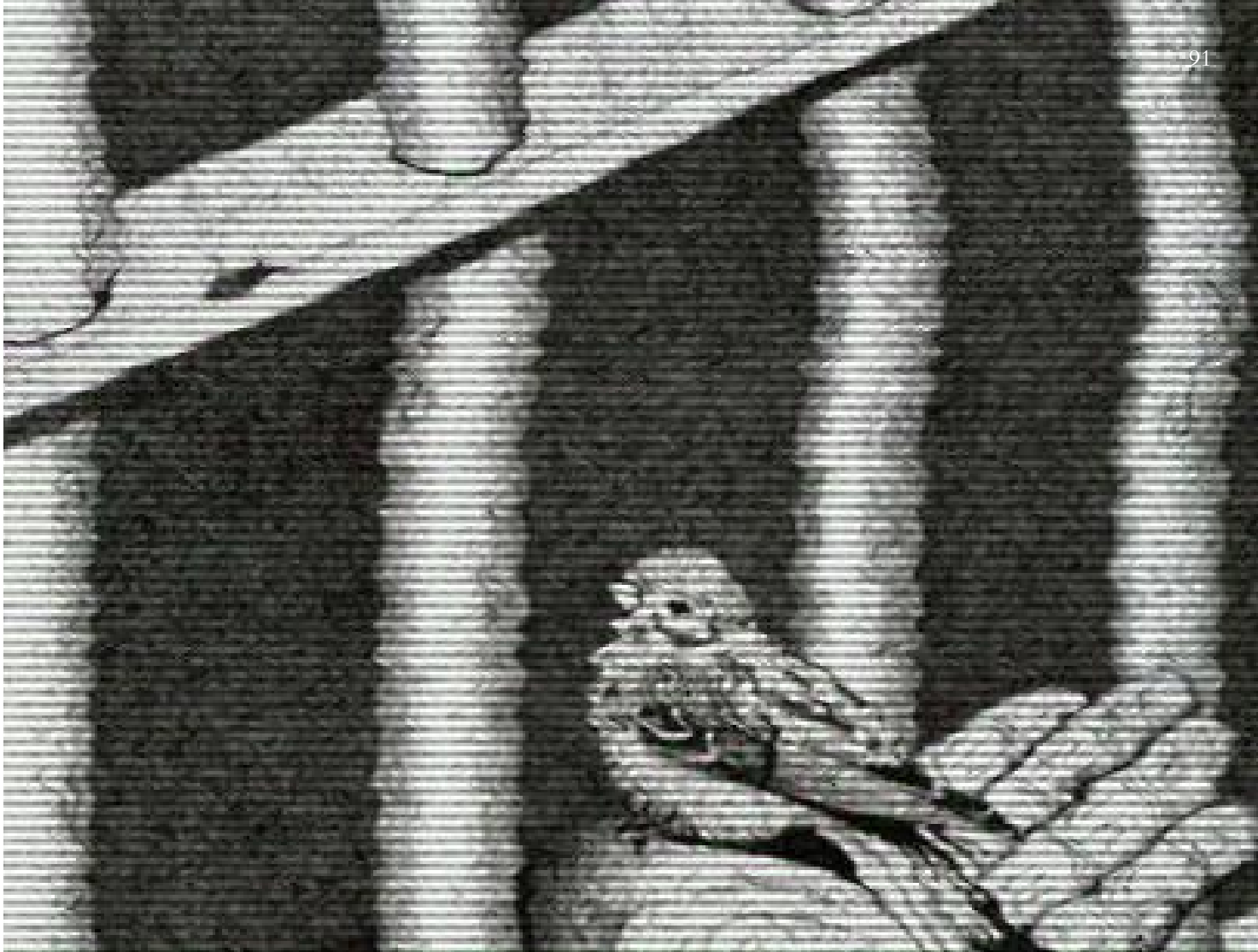


# Whirlpools

Harry Readhead

We are whirlpools:  
    Turning,  
        Adverbial;  
            Refashioning our world  
Before returning to the sea.





# All Else Random Electrical Currents

by Jack Sullivan

**A**gainst the door again.  
Listening to sounds  
that may not be there.

Hard to tell when the walls are so thick. Acoustics in this place are terrible. Perhaps that's why they call it a prison. Don't want you to have any form of entertainment.

But is it entertainment, this? Cruel form of punishment at best.



Yes—punishment. Yet, that is entertainment for them. He knows they're watching. He should stay in bed, pretend to sleep, but curiosity gets the better of him.

Curiosity presses him forward despite all evidence otherwise. It goes hand in hand with delusion—delusion being what got him here in the first place. The others are the same, though—he takes solace in that. The others who scream and howl and talk to themselves in the other cells, cells lining the hallway outside this room.

Where he desperately wants to go. Outside this room.

If only he could open this door, find the key. Then he would leave.

Wouldn't run. He would walk at a normal place. He's not an animal. He deserves respect.

They would like you to believe he is an animal.

He can't understand why anyone would want such a thing.

Yet if his captors were to reveal themselves, explain their reasoning, he might go insane.

And he can't give them that. No, he thinks, listening against the door. I can't give them that.

If he were to strip the floorboards, what do you think he would find? A grave, perhaps? Filled with those who occupied this cell before him?

Skeletons piled atop each other, with no thought to aesthetic or shape?

He remembers the graves that lined the road to his village, the mounds of bodies.

If you are going to make a sport out of killing, he thought at the time, put some thought into it. Everyone deserves that modicum of respect. Everyone deserves for their deaths to mean something, no matter how minor the meaning.

That's what he wants to tell them, those in the other cells, cells lining the halls



outside: your death means something. Even if, in the end, no one remembers your name, and the memory of your face fades like a photo exposed too soon, you will.

You will remember your name, your face, the life you led before you were taken here.

No one chooses to live in a cell, unless it's of their own making.

If he could decide he would strip his bed of these ugly sheets, change them to a brighter color. Put a lamp on the table, remove the broken light bulb overhead. This wouldn't be such a bad place.

But it is, he must remember. He must remember this is a bad place. Given the chance to escape, he would. Though he doesn't know if the world outside is how he left it.

The world he left was not such a good place. Mass graves on the sides of the road; a pogrom in his village. Neighbors knocking on doors, screaming his name. Blood lust in their eyes, dragging his father down the street, stringing him upside down from a lamppost.

Yet that was ages ago. Things have probably changed. He'd be surprised if they haven't. He's changed. No longer the young man who used to tear at these walls until his fingers were raw. Now he sits, docile, tracking sunlight as it flees from the room.

They should let him go.

He's a good prisoner.

He's been a good prisoner, yes.

Even if he did cause some trouble, try to gouge out that one lad's eyes, time has passed. He's changed. Why can't the rest of the world change with him?

No matter. Too much to ask, to ask the world to change. The world is the world, it isn't thinking about him. It wasn't thinking about him when he was outside; it certainly isn't thinking about him now. Sad though, not a single thought spared. Knows it's foolish to think so, he.

I hope he knows. I hope he knows even though he presses himself against the door again, listening to sounds that might not be there, sounds he may have imagined.

Some proverbial North Star to work towards.

Despite the fact his limbs are frozen and his heart, poor heart, will soon cease to beat. And silence, real silence, not the interminable kind that comes in the afternoon, when night waits in the wings, and day stumbles off to fitful rest, descends.

Then, and only then, will he know exactly what he hears, what he sees, the heavy black unchanging, all else random electrical currents.

Until then, he can't be sure. He can't be sure the footsteps aren't his captors returning, the echoing cries and whimpers aren't his siblings calling out, wondering where he's gone. He has to believe, despite all evidence otherwise.

He must tell himself there's a plan to this, shape a story that encompasses everything, his village and father and mass graves and walls stained with his blood.

If the sounds are the same, he tells himself, ear against the door again; if the sounds are the same, I'll go back to bed and kill myself. Because that would mean I'm insane.

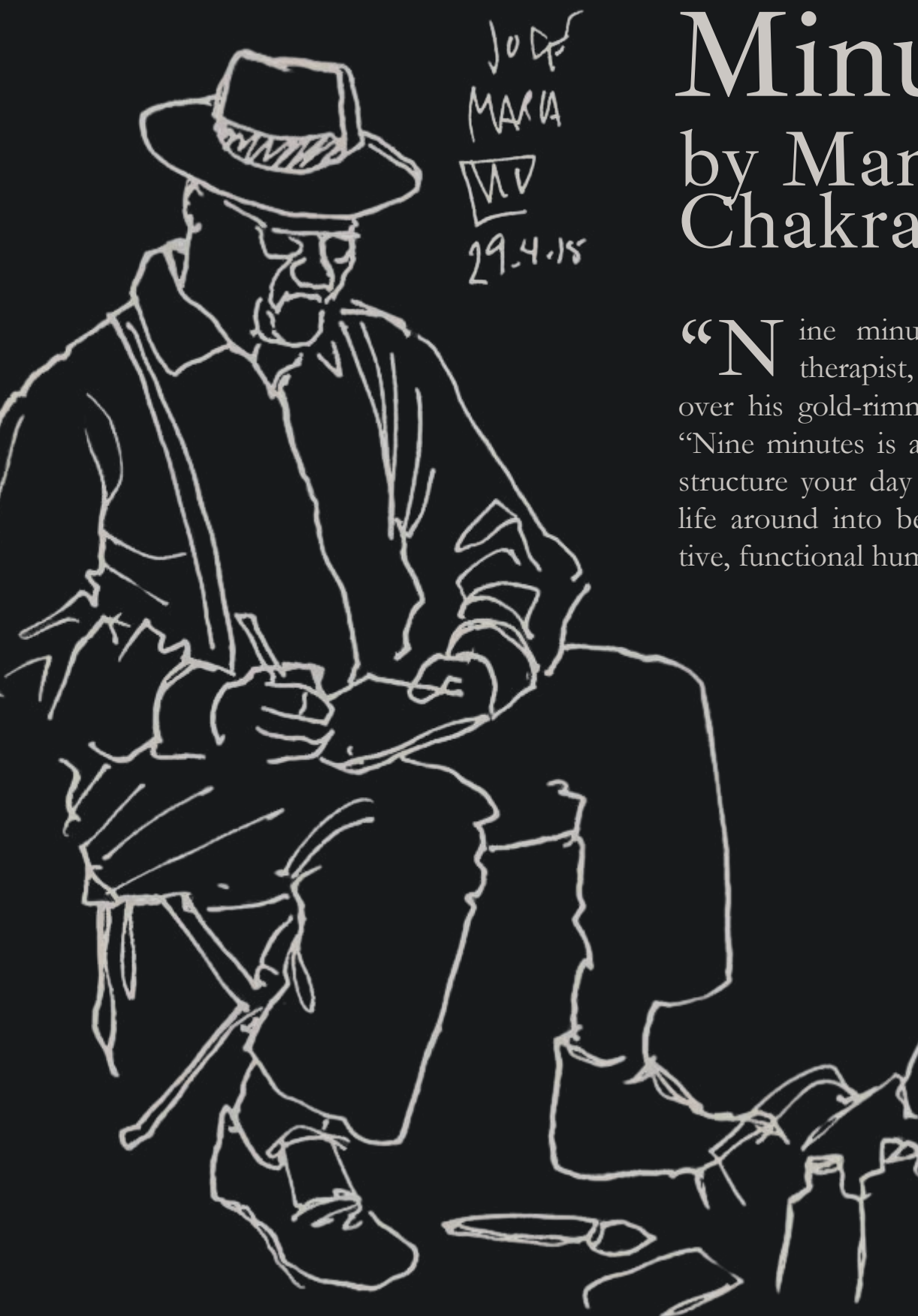
But if the sounds are different—and he prays to God they are—he will continue; he will listen and figure out their meaning, try to piece together whatever he has left in the hope that it will come together, make a key.

*Fin.*









# Nine Minutes

by Mandira Chakraborty

“N ine minutes,” said my therapist, looking at me over his gold-rimmed spectacles, “Nine minutes is all you need to structure your day and turn your life around into being a productive, functional human being.”



I had just had a forty-five-minute session and I knew about the fifty-minute hour rule; in matters of research, I was always ahead of everybody else's game in my peer group. So, I guessed that he would be winding up in five minutes and pressing his bell for the next patient. After the fiftieth minute you became completely invisible to him, so I closed the conversation about a disappearing fiancé over the internet and stepped out of his chamber into a waiting area where all eyes suddenly turned to me, a madwoman in a psychiatrist's chamber who found and lost a man over the internet.

It was the world which was maddening to me. After talking to me for five months from Assam, Guwahati, an eye specialist who had expressed an interest in me through Shaadi.com, and an interest which had turned into a love affair between two voices communicating twenty-four seven with each other, phone calls which would go on till 3 a.m. at night till the birds started to stir, had stopped speaking without probable cause, without information of his whereabouts and without closure or breaking off the relationship, or whatever you would call a 24x7 live-in together on phone.

Those were not the days of social media yet. Orkut still existed, and ghosting was not an everyday term. To make matters worse, the (gentle)man had stopped calling just before my birthday, after leading me sufficiently up the ladder about how he was planning to fly to Kolkata for my birthday and meet me and my family. I had spent my entire salary on curtains for the house and bought a desktop just to keep writing mails to him. He never wrote me back; I should have known.

Trauma from childhood days when my mother gave me the silent treatment came back to me. She would suddenly stop speaking to me, leaving me in a lurch as to what I had done wrong, or how I had committed a misconduct sufficient to earn her ire. Perhaps I had unwittingly broken something she had cherished or I had ignored her when she was singing in a broken voice or telling me a folk tale. "I'm sorry, I didn't know," I would be apologizing to her in my dreams. I started to have nightmares where I apologized to my long-distance lover over and over again, "I'm sorry I didn't know", "I'm sorry I didn't understand this was so important to you".

“Nine minutes,” the therapist told me, was all I should allow myself to compress my feelings and address them to him in my own voice. Any intrusive thought throughout the day was to be set aside as inconvenient, scheduled to be given free reins for nine minutes at night, after which I was supposed to expel it from my mind like a criminal from a witness box or a lunatic from a couch.

It was diet grief. I had been the grief glutton; all my day was consumed over grieving for this unseen gentleman whom I barely knew, was under the illusion of knowing and loving and marrying over telephone only. To control my gluttony, I would have to practice abstinence, not a complete one, because nine minutes were allowed everyday to drink the heady addictive mix of missing a voice and then wham! I was expelled to functionality and back to real life.

It was like scheduling a reboot of my mental software. I would sort out all love related thoughts coming in between studies, classes, staffroom, child, parent, responsibilities etc and schedule them to freely think about them for nine minutes before sleeping at night.

“Whenever you catch yourself having a thought related to him, tell yourself, ‘I am not thinking about it now, but at night in those nine mines of grief’” he told me. Even a sick cat knows to eat some strange green weed-like grass thingy. I acquiesced and agreed to whatever I was told and brought my unruly brain to task.

Practice makes perfect. At first, I struggled with my love sickness, then I grew wary of my love sick thoughts, then I scheduled them for nine minutes at 9 p.m. Then it became my favourite part of the day. I started to write things down. I started to write poems on divorce. I published those poems in *The Statesman* and got a cheque for Rs. 500/=

I started doing well at interviews. I no longer woke groggy eyed from late night bouts of crying but fresh from sleep and free from dreams of losing my teeth. I dreamt of water instead, lots and lots of water: ponds, rivers, swimming pools, oceans of blue ink deep water. I looked forward to nine minutes at 9 p.m. and I looked forward to my appointment every month where I would be happy to report my progress to the gentleman with a degree in matters of the world. I would not be labelled as the saddest woman on earth, no Sir, thank you very much.

At first my indoor plants started to die. Summer temperatures were soaring higher and higher and Kolkata was the topmost humid city of Asia. On a



desert hot May-day my neighbour hanged himself from an iron rod in his car shed after his wife of thirty years passed away due to cancer. No one had told him of the nine-minute rule. My mother had a proportionate reaction to the incident. She stopped going out and avoided the side of our house where we shared a wall with the neighbours; she would open the westside door and make that a thoroughfare. Our parrot developed beak and feather disease and had to be put down at the vets. An elder cousin called one day about a messy divorce he was having and whined for forty minutes straight. What a colossal waste of time! Our house help ditched her drunk husband, married a local municipality worker and discovered that he had another set of wife and two sons in a village in Malda and kept petitioning us for a raise to feed her extended family.

Nine minutes kept me alive. One night I woke up with a need to visit the loo and saw a faint silhouette of someone standing near the washroom door. I switched on the light but there was no one there. Preparing for class in the evening while my mother made chapatis for dinner I would sense a presence at my back. As if somebody were trying to read over my shoulder. I would wake up in the morning to find a pebble in my pillow or a Shiuli flower from our garden. I would come back home to find my books arranged in alphabetical order, my food warm and my bed made although my mother would deny ever doing these for me and claimed that I had been super functional of late, and maybe I had just forgotten that I had done these things. My bank passbooks were updated, my certificates were in order, my diary did not miss a single page entry and I did not miss a single psychiatrist's appointment.

But someone was walking around the house at night. Fridge doors were left ajar, sweets went missing, my son secretly suspected me of polishing off the cherry toppings on a white pineapple pastry I had brought for him from Flury's. While I was dreaming of water sloshing around in great waves of a blue-grey sea, I could sense someone curled up near my feet, trying to smell the sea in my dream. When I awoke in the morning all fresh and sharp, I could feel someone slinking away from the pillow next to me, tired and groggy from insomnia and nocturnal weeping.

A year after my doctor declared me well and able to lead a normal life again, I broke off with Arun Gadgil, a writer from Delhi on a fellowship at the British library where we spent a lot of time together. Arun complained that I had not given him closure, that there was no probable cause to break off so

abruptly but I told him that he would be going back to Delhi soon and I was settled in Kolkata for my life. We had no future as it were. Should he need support, I gave him my doctor's phone number and told him, in nine minutes, the nine-minute rule to keep functional and went home for an afternoon siesta.

Ambient noise in the afternoons in Calcutta includes a street vendor in my para every day at 3 p.m. peddling fares accompanied by a Nirmala Mishra like lachrymose female lead singing "Tumi toh amar chirodiner hashi kannar sathi" (you are my everlasting companion of smiles and tears). I was semi awake, feeling a small pair of hands brushing my face, as if trying to find tears where there were none. When I woke there were footprints leading from the bed to the dining room, but nobody was there.

I felt great every day; I was leading my best life and felt that nothing could subdue me. My friends complained that I was losing touch with them. My parents rued that I was never available and my son grew grumpy day by day, growing distant and more distant. I repaired our attic and transferred all my reading material there to work in peace at night. One night as I slogged away at my thesis I heard the sound of weeping. My father had passed away recently and at first, I thought my mother was finally venting her grief; for she hadn't wept at all, not in the first few days at least.

I went and checked; it wasn't her. She was fast asleep under Valium.

Someone was weeping, for sure. I take the moral high ground. "You don't exist," I say loudly. The sobs keep coming. "You are the saddest creature on this earth, you are dysfunctional," I say rudely to the weeping child. "But I will not talk to you now, I have work to do, understand? I will talk to you for nine minutes at Nine o'clock tomorrow night," I tell her and go back to a set of illness memoirs, the subject matter of my thesis.

Two years later the world shut down to prevent the spreading of Covid-19, but it was already too late. One by one the familiar faces disappear from our lives. Garbage piles up as the local municipality cannot find workers to collect garbage. Streets are deserted except for strays and after a few months even strays aren't around because they had died without food or migrated. Work piles up, there is no house help around, my bedridden mother needs constant care and the caregivers have stopped working under bans by authorities. Then there is a severe storm, after a terrible heat wave, a storm uprooting trees in numbers and killing several people in its wake. My dog dies.

Morning brings a burden of one hundred tonnes of grief under whose

weight I crumble and crush. I hear the pitter-patter of my dog's footsteps around the house, I feel him licking away my tears at night and I sleep on my son's chest, holding on to him hanging for dear life. I am afraid of death, of the world ending and my heart pounds like a horse in my chest.

At night in my sleep, I feel a small pair of hands slowly moving over my face, over my eyes, touching my forehead, gently surfing through my hair and lingering for a long time on my cheek, wet with tears.

"I am sorry, I didn't know," I whisper.

I keep talking to the thing by my bedside "I didn't know it was so important to you. I am sorry."



*Fin.*





30" X 36"  
ACRYLIC  
ON  
CANVAS  
(2024)



SHABNAM MIRI





# Up My Sleeve

Bart Edelman

Something up my sleeve,  
But I can never find it.  
I know it's there,  
Rubbing me the wrong way,  
Making it a pain to pitch  
An idea, knuckle curveball,  
Or even, God forbid, woo—  
The kind you surely deserve.  
Can't quite pin it down.  
A little to the left,  
A smidgen to the right,  
And here I am, lost again.

Perhaps, you could observe.  
Try to unlock the mystery:  
Where it likes to reside.  
What makes the tock tick.  
Why it always eludes me—  
Each and every chance.  
Between the both of us,  
Let's take copious notes.  
Conduct nightly study sessions,  
Get to the heart of the matter.  
Court fate, as it dictates.  
Catch sparks in the dark.

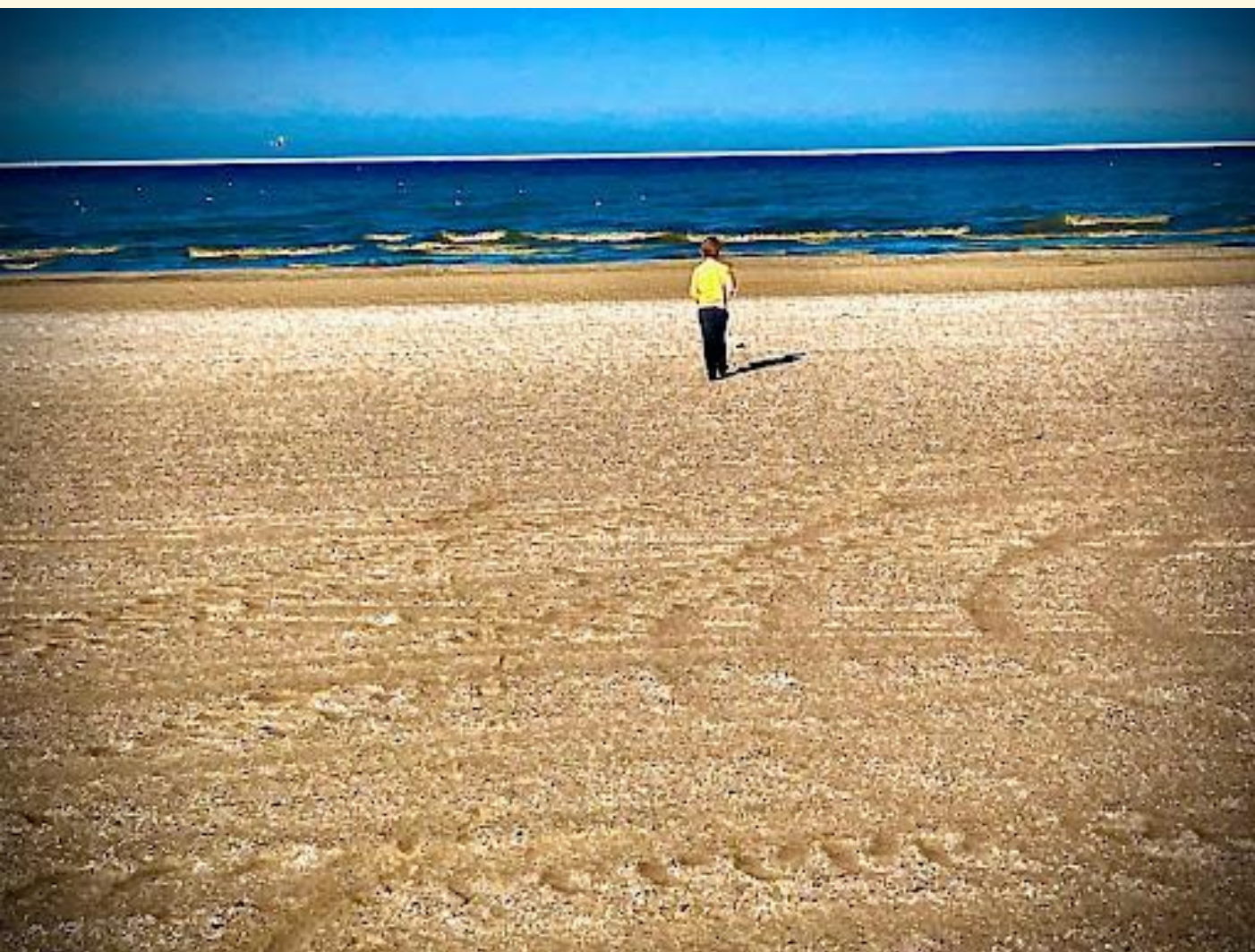


**DIMENSIONS** GEORGE CASSIDY PAYNE

This photograph was taken at the *Yayoi Kusama: INFINITY MIRRORED ROOM - LET'S SURVIVE FOREVER* (2017) exhibit at the Memorial Art Gallery in Rochester, NY. Visitors are given just one minute inside the room — a fleeting moment that creates a fascinating tension between experiencing the installation directly and capturing it through a photograph. This compression of time became part of the creative process itself.



This photograph is a meditation on color. Recently, I've been reflecting on the work of Alma Thomas, the abstract expressionist painter. In this image, the sand, water, sky, and a young boy are all expressions of color—a visual language where meaning is shaped not by the objects themselves, but by what we bring to them.



BLUE AND YELLOW GEORGE CASSIDY PAYNE



BEAVER DAM  
GEORGE CASSIDY PAYNE

I captured this image at Lake Pleasant in Speculator, a village in Hamilton County, New York. While the Southwest Adirondacks may not boast the towering peaks of mountains like Marcy and Whiteface, they offer quieter moments of natural sublimity—scenes like this one, where stillness and beauty are suspended in time.



# Red Sails in the Canadian Sunset

John RC Potter

*A hybrid poem with artwork and a musical recording.  
The painting is by the author's god-daughter, Nisa Winter.*



I have this memory box on a shelf,  
and stored away in the back of my mind.  
It holds artifacts that were left behind  
from a little gal as well as myself.  
I'm in Istanbul with memories all aglow  
that transports me back to my youth so long ago.  
But I am not on this journey all by myself:  
the girl is nearby, and the box is on the shelf.  
She's the bright light shining every day  
to illuminate my path on the way.  
Red sails in the Canadian sunset,  
birds flying away without any threat.  
Red skies at night are a sailor's delight;  
these memories come alive as I write.  
She'll continue to be always be near, even when  
I'm no longer on this side of the great divide.



THE ORIGINAL "CANADIAN SUNSET" RECORDING (EDDIE HEYWOOD, RCA VICTOR)  
CANADIAN SUNSET HUGO WINTERHALTER & EDDIE HEYWOOD {DES STEREO}





*Sunset - Isle of Shoals*  
Warren W. Shephard (American, 1858 - 1937)

## AAYUSHI MAJUMDER

Aayushi has always been passionate about mythology and horror. From doodling in corners of notebooks to penning down melancholic poems, her love for art and the aesthetic keeps her glued to her notes app.

Linktree: [tr.ee/qbx2Ab](https://tr.ee/qbx2Ab)

## ADELIE O. CONDRA

Adelie O. Condra is a Virginian writer, caught between the urban and rural. She prefers her writing surrealistic, dark, or thoroughly weird if she can help it. Her work appears in *The WEIGHT*, *microliths*, *The Battering Ram*, and more, including *BarBar*, of which she is now Co-Editor.

Instagram: [@adelie.o.condra](https://www.instagram.com/adelie.o.condra)

## ARCH RAMESH

As an immigrant with a hyphenated identity, Arch likes exploring questions about belonging, identity, and transience through stories. Her essay *Somewhere in Between* was runners-up in The Preservation Foundation's 2021 non-fiction contest.

## ALAINA HAMMOND

Alaina Hammond is a poet, playwright, fiction writer, and visual artist. Her poems, plays, short stories, paintings, drawings and photographs have been published both online and in print.

Instagram: [@alainaheidelberg](https://www.instagram.com/alainaheidelberg)

## A.D.

a.d. is a bisexual poet and visual artist. She is drawn to the sacred, the profane, the mysterious and the mythological, which provides inspiration for her work.

Tumblr & Twitter: [@godstained](https://www.tumblr.com/godstained)

## BARLOW CRASSMONT

Barlow Crassmont has lived in the USA, Eastern Europe, Middle East and China. When not teaching or writing, he dabbles in juggling, solving the Rubik's Cube, and learning other languages.

## BART EDELMAN

Bart Edelman's latest poetry collections include *The Last Mojito*, *The Geographer's Wife*, *Whistling to Trick the Wind*, and *This Body Is Never at Rest: New and Selected Poems 1993 – 2023*.

## BRITTANY ACKERMAN

Brittany Ackerman is a writer from Riverdale, New York. She is the author of *The Perpetual Motion Machine* and *The Brittany's*. Her Substack is called *taking the stairs*.

Website: [brittanyackerman.com](https://brittanyackerman.com)

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## CHRISTOPHER WOODS

Christopher Woods is a writer and photographer who lives in Texas. His monologue show, *Twelve from Texas*, was performed in NYC by Equity Library Theatre. His poetry collection, *Maybe Birds Would Carry It Away*, is published by Kelsay Books.

Gallery: [christopherwoods.zenfolio.com/f861509283](https://christopherwoods.zenfolio.com/f861509283)

Instagram: [@riverbedsky2229](https://www.instagram.com/riverbedsky2229)

## DIYA TYAGI

Diya Tyagi is a perpetually tired writer and poet. She has an unhealthy relationship with caffeine and semicolons. Diya volunteers as a staff writer at *Taxi Society Magazine*, *The Loft Literary*, and several other magazines. When not writing, you can find her baking some atrocity in her kitchen, experimenting with film, or pacing her room at midnight.

## DOUG VAN HOOSER

Doug Van Hooser's poetry has appeared in numerous publications and has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and Orison Anthology.

Website: [dougvanhooser.com](https://dougvanhooser.com)

## FAY L. LOOMIS

Pieces by Fay L. Loomis, Kerhonkson, New York, appear in numerous publications, including five poetry anthologies. Her first chapbook *Sunlit Wildness* was published in 2024. She is a nominee for the Pushcart Prize.

## GEORGE CASSIDY PAYNE

George Cassidy Payne is a writer, educator, and crisis counselor based in Rochester, NY. His work explores philosophy, trauma, and resilience, blending lived experience with a deep curiosity about language, ethics, and survival.

## HARRY READHEAD

Harry Readhead is a poet and critic from London. His work has appeared in The Guardian, The TLS, The New Statesman, and many other titles. He runs the Guilt and Industry Substack.

X: [@harry\\_readhead](#)

## IGAL STULBACH

Igal Stulbach is a visual artist making photography, documentary films and video art. Born in Krakow Poland in the year 1949 to Holocaust survivors, since 1959 living in Bat Yam, Israel. He started his artistic activity at a relatively late age.

## ISABELLA ARP

Isabella Arp is a self-taught multi-discipline artist and sole proprietor of 24Hr Coffee Fine Art. Influenced by her vocation in information technology, her work often incorporates visuals inspired by computing and postmodernism.

## JACK SULLIVAN

Jack is a queer writer and visual artist living in Brooklyn, NY. His prose and poetry can be found in YES POETRY, GHOST CITY REVIEW, OROBOROS, STREETCAKE, and BODEGA.

## JACQUELINE SCHAALJE

Jacqueline Schaalje has published poetry and short fiction, most recently in Kelp/The Wave, Ponder Review, and Milk Candy Review. She won the 2022 Florida Review Editor's Prize.

## JESS RUSH

Jess Rush is a transgenre writer and multidisciplinary artist who lives between Paris, France and Boston, MA. An intentional vagabond, their writing resides at the border between the French and English languages. You can find them engaging in varying degrees of civil disobedience on:

Substack: [@mynameisdaughter](#)

Instagram: [@butchxbimbo](#)

Website: [jessrush.xyz](#)

## JESSE SIMPSON

My name is Jesse Simpson, and I am a Memphis-based writer and educator with an MFA in English. I write nonfiction, genre fiction, and academic articles.

X: [@poridgeboy](#)

## JOHN RC POTTER

John RC Potter lives in Istanbul. Highlights: Prose - 'Ruth's World' (Pushcart Prize nominee); Poetry - 'Tomato Heart' (Best of the Net Award nominee).

Website: [johnrcpotterauthor.com](#)

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## JONNY EBERLE

Jonny Eberle lives in Tacoma, WA, with his family, a dog, and three adorable typewriters. His fiction appears in Creative Colloquy, Grit City Magazine, All Worlds Wayfarer, and elsewhere.

Website: [jweberle.com](#)

## JOONHEE MYUNG

Joonhee Myung (JUNOS) crafts worlds where mythology, folklore, and memory intertwine. Weaving digital and organic forms, she explores hybridity and cultural echoes. Her poem Tubakhae drifts through Seoul's subways.

## KHADIJA BILAL

Khadija Bilal is a writer, editor, columnist, founder and Editor-in-chief of "The Literary Times". She has published her works in various magazines and newspapers including The Wayfarer, TWS Publications and more.

Instagram: [@depressedp0et](#)

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## LINDAANN LOSCHIAVO

Native New Yorker. Poet. Writer. Dramatist. In 2024, I had 3 books published in 3 different countries & 2 won awards. [@ghostlyverse.bsky.social](#)

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## LYNN D. GILBERT

Lynn D. Gilbert has had over 100 poems published in journals and anthologies. A founding editor of *Borderlands: Texas Poetry Review*, she lives in a suburb of Austin and reviews poetry submissions for *Third Wednesday*.

## MANDIRA CHAKRABORTY

Mandira Chakraborty is a poet, writer and dreamer, from Kolkata, West Bengal, India. She writes because no one listens. She loves her dog Noorie to the moon and back.

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## MARK J. MITCHELL

Mark J. Mitchell has been a working poet for 50 years. His novel, *A Book of Lost Songs*, is due in April. He lives and works in San Francisco.

## MARK KEANE

Mark Keane has taught in universities in the US and the UK. Recent short story fiction has appeared in *Paris Lit Up*, *Shooter*, *untethered*, *Night Picnic* and *Firewords*. He lives in Scotland.

## NATTIE O'SHEGGZY

Nattie O'Sheggzy as a poet finds inspiration in life's complexities. He has published two poetry collections: *Random Imaginations* and *Sounds of the Wooden Gong*. He's featured in *Sandy River Review* and *Smoky Quartz*.

## ÖZGE LENA

Özge Lena is a poet with more than a hundred poems published in many countries across the world. She was nominated twice, shortlisted four times for international poetry awards.

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## RALPH CULVER

Ralph Culver's work appears in many print and online journals. His most recent poetry collection is *A Passable Man* (2021), with his new book *This to This* forthcoming in 2025.

**Website:** [www.pw.org/directory/writers/ralph\\_culver](http://www.pw.org/directory/writers/ralph_culver)

## SARA STEGEN

Sara Stegen is a poet and non-fiction author. Home is a boulder-clay ridge in the Netherlands where she is working on a memoir about apples and autism.

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## SHABNAM MIRI

I am Shabnam Miri, a visual artist born in August 1993 in Tehran, Iran. I hold a BFA and MA in Painting from the Art University of Tehran in Iran and am currently pursuing my MFA in Painting at the University of South Carolina.

## SOFIA IDA CESTARI

Sofia Ida Cestari is an Italian writer and editor. She lives in Spain and studies Philology. She loves cinema, screenwriting, poetry and journalism. She also is the founder of *Eloquentia Magazine*.

**Instagram:** [@sofiadacestari](https://www.instagram.com/sofiadacestari)

## SPENCER KEENE

Spencer Keene (he/him) is a writer and lawyer from Vancouver, BC. His poetry and short fiction have appeared in a variety of print and digital publications.

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## TED MILLAR

Ted Millar teaches English at Mahopac High School in New York. His work has appeared in *English Journal* in addition to over 30 other literary journals.

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## V HOLECEK

V Holecek is a multi-disciplinary visual artist and existential shitposter. America's favorite cursed meatsuit and Void Horror life partner to a feral witch. Probably haunted. He protects flat surfaces from the elements and exposes them to the critic.



Peder Severin Krøyer (Danish, 1851-1909)





