

Wendy K. Mages

Redheaded Angel

NONFICTION

Janina Aza Karpinska

Almost Smothered

COLLAGE + BACK COVER ART

Ashleigh Rajala

Do Not Resuscitate

FICTION

Adrian Kennedy

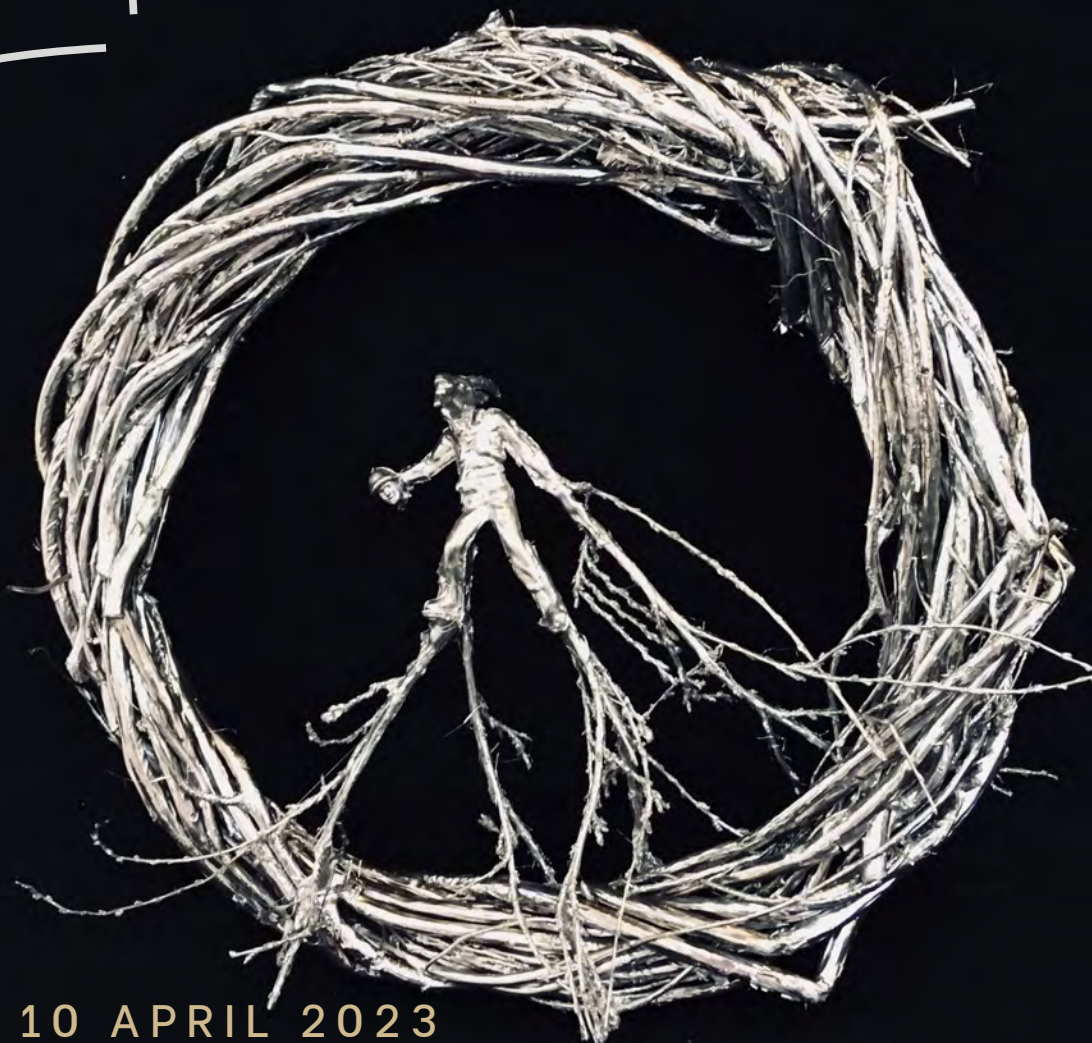
Jaguar, but Pronounce the "U"

EXPERIMENTAL

Jack Bordnick

Facing It Together

ART + FRONT COVER ART



red- headed angel

wendy k.
mages

Afraid and hyper-focused, I'm riding shotgun, staring straight ahead. Phone in hand, I hesitate to text my sister an update.

We're in the ambulance now. Send.

My 93-year-old mom is moaning and whimpering as the paramedics try to comfort her. With each sound she makes a dagger pierces my heart. I hear myself saying, "It'll be okay, Mom. It'll be okay." Tears well in my eyes; I wonder if I'm lying.

The siren wails, lights flashing we ride through the streets, but there's traffic. The cars around us don't (or won't) pull over to let us pass. It takes an eternity to go even a few blocks.

Arriving @ hospital. Send.

Finally! Send.

I'm walking beside the gurney as the paramedics roll her down the hospital corridors. My mom's child-sized hand is holding tightly onto mine. We're taken to a small glassed-in room. Once they have transferred my mom onto the examining table, the paramedics leave and the hospital staff takes over.

We're in a room in the ER. Send.

Doctors ask a barrage of questions and I am trying to answer when someone in scrubs with a syringe says,

“This will help the pain.” I see my mom flinch, but her moaning stops almost instantly. I take a deep breath, relieved she’s no longer suffering. Suddenly, we’re all alone. The doctors seem to have vanished, perhaps called away to attend to a more urgent case. The room is unnervingly quiet, save for the incessant rhythm of beeping monitors.

“Who’s the lady?”

“What lady, Mom?”

“The one in the window.”

“Mom, there’s no lady in the window.”

My mom came in with abdominal pain and now she’s talking crazy talk. Waves of panic cascade through my body.

“My mom may be 93 but she doesn’t hallucinate,” I explain to anyone who will listen. No one seems to believe me.

“You said she had a stroke in March?” a nurse oozes dulcet condescension, treacle meant to remind me that my mother’s brain is not what it once was.

“Yes, but she doesn’t hallucinate. This just started.”

“Mmhmm,” she nods, placating what she clearly believes are my

“delusions” and my inability to acknowledge my mother’s cognitive impairment. Yet, I’m more than keenly aware of the impact of her stroke, the skills that were impaired, and those that were left intact. Before we arrived in the ER my mother did not hallucinate. Her perception of reality has drastically changed in the short time since we arrived, and I’m concerned she’s having another stroke. I poke my head out of the room, but no one will talk to me. I’m told to be patient. So, reluctantly, I return to the chair in my mom’s glassed-in fishbowl.

A sweet redheaded boy appears in the doorway wearing a white coat. “Hi, I’m Danny,” he says, using his first name. I smile and nod. He begins to check on my mom.

My finger moves across my phone.

Doogie Howser just walked in....

Looks about 12. Send.

I stare at the message. It says:

Doofus Howser just walked in....

In my hyper-focused, hyper-vigilant state, this antithetical autocorrect strikes me as hilariously funny. Like a volcano, tremors begin to quake deep inside. I try to suppress this eruption, but I am no longer in my

body. I am high above the scene watching the madwoman sitting in my chair convulse into hysterical laughter. I'm appalled!

I look at poor Doogie. I can't think of a single sane thing to say. I hear myself mumbling something about autocorrect, but Doogie's not judging. His voice—knowledgeable, kind, and comforting—emanates calmly from the visual epitome of a young choirboy or a redheaded angel all in white. His youthful appearance belies the depth of his expertise.

Danny explains medical procedures like an old pro, but he's different: he's listening. When I describe the sudden onset of my mom's hallucinations, he believes me.

"Don't worry. It's the morphine talking." Danny's deceptively naïve countenance all but conceals his true wisdom. Unlike the others, he doesn't discount what I tell him, enabling him to quickly quell my concerns as he shares the etiology of Mom's hallucinations.

"Oh, okay. It's just the morphine."

I'm so relieved! I feel my body relax into the chair as he talks with my mom, quietly explaining to her all the things the doctors are trying to do to help her,

all the things the other doctors never bothered to mention.

Love Doogie! Send.

► **Wendy K. Mages**, a Professor at Mercy College, is a storyteller, researcher, and educator who performs her original stories at storytelling events and festivals in the US and abroad.

website: <https://www.mercy.edu/directory/wendy-mages>

almost smothered

janina aza karpinska

- ▶ **Janina Aza Karpinska** is a multidisciplinary artist and creative storyteller.

Almost Smothered is from "The Goldilocks Files" for "Twisted Fairy-Tales Exhibition" (influenced by Tom Phillips).



DOWN

"Oh, dear!"

sigh

"I do feel so tired,"

almost smothered

~~the whole world is full of people who are~~

it was so hard ~~to see the world from~~
~~anywhere~~ which-ever way she turned.

~~the whole world is full of people who are~~
~~at the top side, now you~~
~~at the very soon~~ locks



do not resuscitate

ashleigh rajala

► An award-winning fiction writer and indie role-playing game designer, **Ashleigh Rajala** lives and works in Surrey, BC, on the traditional territories of the Coast Salish peoples.

It started with the cure for cancer. I didn't believe it at first; no one did. It was impossible to think it was anything but fake news, and plus I was wary of getting my hopes up. We'd gone through everything you could think of with Sarah. Chemo. Experimental drugs. Naturopaths. Even *positive* fucking *thinking*.

She was more positive than I was by the end of it. I guess she had to be. It was her life on the line, not mine. I was just the husband. But it was there, all over Twitter. Facebook. Every TV channel. Texts and notifications were popping up on my phone. *Is it real? Is it true? How is Sarah feeling?*

Everyone says that now. "It started with the cure for cancer." But it wasn't really a cure.

Cancer just... *stopped*. Everywhere. All at once. I had my phone in my hand, staring down at the messages in disbelief. Even people I hadn't heard from in months, those who avoided us under the pretext of "giving us space." You know, those who are really just scared and don't want to face it. They reached out now. *Is Sarah's cancer gone? Just like all the others?*

I walked into the bedroom that I

still thought of as ours, even though I hadn't slept in there in months. Sarah had always wanted to die at home. Nothing was making sense; it all felt like a sick joke, but then I saw her, sitting up in bed, grinning.

"It doesn't hurt anymore," she said. I wanted to say it was the morphine, but I saw the drip dangling, useless. She'd ripped it out. I didn't think she'd had the strength.

But it wasn't just cancer. It was *everything*.

Well, almost everything. Nurses and doctors in hospices reported the terminally ill just suddenly feeling better. Emergency rooms had no more casualties. Heart attacks, car accidents, anything. They still happened, but everyone survived.

Even the very old clung to life.

For a while, any death made the news. People were still getting the hang of what was going on. No one quite knew "the rules" yet.

That is, until doctors, I guess, got cocky. With patients unable to die, what was the point of stressing out to save their life?

So this was the kicker, the thing no one saw coming: no one could die unless

under someone's express intent. Murder and suicide were still on the table.

Someone jumping off a bridge with the intent to die would die. Someone with poison slipped into their wine would die.

And negligence, as it had all come to show, was equal to intent. A doctor not stepping in to save a life was effectively ending it. A paramedic dilly-dallying on their response. A parent leaving their baby in the woods.

That came like a second wave. First, no one dies. Then, too many die. Half were ruled accidents. The courts ate themselves alive with the question of culpability. If one didn't believe their victim would actually die, how could one prove intent?

The news was too much for anyone to bear those days.

Not least of all Sarah.

And she had nothing to do but sit at home, watching the news.

She'd tried to get her job back but couldn't. She'd quit when she'd got her diagnosis six months previous, and when she was cured, they'd filled her position. There was no precedent for not dying when everyone thought you were going to. There was just a, "You quit. Sorry. New person is past their

probationary period," and a casual shrug.

At first, it was easy to say, "At least I'm alive," but then, I suppose, the pain of living creeps back in. At least it did for her.

The rest of the world carried on. Now that we all knew "the rules," that is.

Nurses had to keep nursing. Safety regulations had to stay in place. Food still had to be consumed.

I'd come home from work myself and find Sarah red-eyed on the sofa. She always had questions for me. "Why they'd stop calling?" I didn't know how to answer that one. Whom did she mean? Those who stopped calling when she got sick or those who stopped calling now that she was all better?

Another day, she asked, "What will happen when we all get too old? Who will deal with us?"

And another: "Why is this happening?"

And then she couldn't ask anything at all.

The inevitable catches up and we all act surprised though we should've seen it coming. But we all have to live on and live with each other.

Whatever that looks like. I can't quite tell myself yet.

We can't die, but that doesn't mean we're gonna make it out of this alive.

jaguar,
but pronounce
the "u"
adrian kennedy

- ▶ **Adrian Kennedy** is a writer whom chooses to remain nondescript. Their work, "To Face the Sun," has previously been featured in *In Parenthesis* online blog.



I became the one thing I sought to destroy

A child?

No!

A velociraptor

It eats people raw

Bones wet with blood and flesh

Like a Big Mac

Blood being the sauce

How gross.

In Catholic Church we drink gods blood

And we eat his body

So

How could we be so different than a velociraptor

If not even worse

Eating our savior

Stop

Don't think of it that way.

A wasp

It stings people

And it'll never tell you why because it's a wasp and it can't speak

Yet

They can grow, just like anything.

You're doing it again, you know you need to stop.

It's a human

Who does very bad things

Who can't be forgiven and doesn't want forgiveness

That's what they say

Constantly.

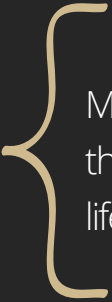
But I am also human

The apple must not fall far.

This hasn't been helpful. I'm sorry.

facing it together

jack bordnick



My sculptural imagery is a reflection of my past and present forces and included in the imagination of life's stories. They represent an evolutionary process of how all of life's forces are interconnected.

► **website:** www.jackbordnickstudio.com







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and outreach organization, making space for
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