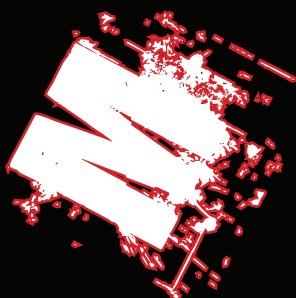
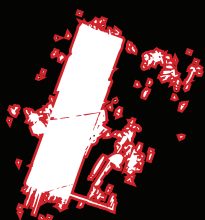
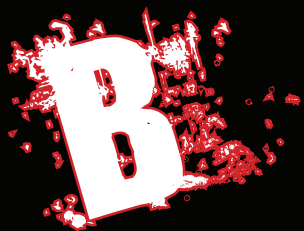




LIM BO







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About

Caustic Frolic is a student-run interdisciplinary journal that publishes fiction, non-fiction, poetry, art, and digital/mixed media. We seek work that pushes the limits of genre, that swells in the unexpected. We publish on a semiannual basis, collecting submissions from contributors around the globe.

Letter from the editor

Dear readers, contributors, and staff,

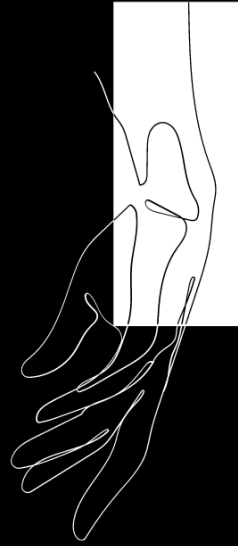
Globally, we have been living in a world of static, confusion, limbo. The idea of being stagnant and confused has always intrigued me, from continuously living in a city that is fast-paced, and having an extraverted personality. So how can creators take this time, and write about their interpretation of limbo? How has limbo made a drastic change in life? More importantly, how can we use this time of limbo to create greater things?

I first came across limbo when studying abroad in Florence, and having a professor assign us to visit Piazza del limbo. This is where unbaptized children were buried, and stood in a state of limbo. When visiting the small square, I remember feeling the mystery, curiosity, and connection to this spot. So let's explore our own weirdness and stagnant states.

Sincerely,
Gabby Pardo, Editor in Chief



caustic
FROLIC



Poetry





At thirteen

By Ana Doina

Peeling potatoes in my mother's kitchen
I never thought I'd ever get to be twenty.
Didn't think of growing old, only of stillness

some sort of frozen time in the peeling of ages
while the trees would endlessly
blossom on a full moon, the summers

would always bring seed-filled fruits
and the autumn-carved leaves would forever
coil silently into a semblance of darkness.

Ana Doina, a Romanian-born American writer living in NJ, had to leave Romania during the Ceausescu regime, due to political and social pressures. Her poems appeared in many literary magazines, anthologies, and textbooks. Two of her poems were nominated for 2002, and 2004 Pushcart Prize.

Outside the Frame

By Annette M. Sisson

after Remedios Varo's painting "Rupture"

A woman resists the canvas, her journey—
silent birth, the slit between gravid

doors. She descends wide stairs
as if steps were shallow coffins

of ancestors' bones. If she reaches
the flat path, she might breathe

new air—or be locked away.
She inches down, again, again,

measured, her feet subtle, sun
brazen on her body, beyond the walls

one radiant, the other dull.
Bare trees tempt the cloud

burning behind her—she rebuffs the wind
that whips muted flames and thrashes

curtains sideways. Rapacious eyes
observe her flight, cannot fathom

how she moved the heavy gates,
nor see flecks of copper sky


in her gathered cloak. They do not mark
the sinews of the woman's delicate feet,

her stark passage the light frameless




The Body, Holy Island of Lindesfarne

By Annette M. Sisson



This small earth, the tide's salt-edged tongues, damp licking. Breath eddies, swells the sponge of lungs, lobes suspended amid sky and sea, exhaling, exhaling. Gust gathers, sweeps through the priory ruins, presses sheaves of basalt, wrenches cord grass and bogbean—the chest-hinge opens. Blood thumps. Gale surges, crests, pummels laps of sand. Ancient monks murmur, figments in spray. Slick, mercurial bodies, molded heads—grey seals bob in surf; they lumber to shore, clamber onto rock, keep vigil, quiet as gospel on calfskin.



Annette Sisson's poems can be found in *Birmingham Poetry Review*, *Nashville Review*, *Typishly*, *One*, *The West Review*, *HeartWood Literary Magazine*, *Sky Island Journal*, and others. Her first full-length book, *Small Fish in High Branches*, is forthcoming from Glass Lyre Press (2022); her chapbook, *A Casting Off*, was published by *Finishing Line* (2019). She was named a Mark Strand Poetry Scholar for the 2021 Sewanee Writers' Conference, a 2020 BOAAT Writing Fellow, and winner of The Porch Writers' Collective's 2019 Poetry Prize.

ACQUAINTANCE

By Frederick Pollack

A small clean flat in a mixed low-crime
arrondissement. White wife from
a once-Communist family.
No kids. Familiar on the metro (which
he has always disliked but accepts); in
their local place, a two-star restaurant.
Adds numbers for a firm in La Défense.
Works well, but won't be made department head.
Some of those numbers, elsewhere, create scenes
like those he remembers – everything possible
done to his village, parents, and sister
before they were burnt – but he accepts that too.
(Mitterand like Reagan supported
the President. There had been, besides a tribal,
a religious difference he recalls
less often than the school he somehow reached,
after the camp, which noticed his math skills.)
He emerges, faintly, from behind a chance article.
Is someone with whom I'm in a sort of
communication – shares
my attitude towards tribes, religions,
capital, nations, though with a different tone.

Author of two book-length narrative poems, *THE ADVENTURE* and *HAPPINESS*, both Story Line Press; the former to be reissued by Red Hen Press. Two collections of shorter poems, *A POVERTY OF WORDS*, (Prolific Press, 2015) and *LANDSCAPE WITH MUTANT* (Smokestack Books, UK, 2018). Pollack has appeared in *Salmagundi*, *Poetry Salzburg Review*, *The Fish Anthology* (Ireland), *Magma* (UK), *Bateau*, *Fulcrum*, *Chiron Review*, *Chicago Quarterly Review*, etc. Online, poems have appeared in *Big Bridge*, *Hamilton Stone Review*, *BlazeVox*, *The New Hampshire Review*, *Mudlark*, *Rat's Ass Review*, *Faircloth Review*, *Triggerfish*, etc. (Caustic Frolic 2020).



Agave Oracle

By Michael Berton

when the tequila runs out
poets in Mexico will write
elegies to honor
los borrachos
who will become atheists
refusing to acknowledge
patron saints' days
for only the cowardly
can consent to live
a dishonored life

Michael Berton is an educator, world traveler, percussionist and tequila aficionado. He has had poems appear in Cold Noon, Sin Fronteras Journal, Shot Glass Journal, And/Or, Volt, The Opiate, Caveat Lector, Gargoyle, Fourteen Hills, El Portal, Yellow Medicine Review, Silkworm, Goat's Milk Magazine and others. He was nominated for the Touchstone Award in 2021. He is originally from El Paso, Texas currently living in Portland, Oregon.

A NEARBY TOWN BY PAMELA CARTER

I know a woman who imagines hauling
horrible thoughts from a posterior location
within her skull—where she hears these fester—

to her frontal lobe, like a mover
with a box-loaded dolly, her knowledge
of cranial functions a map
of rooms to decorate, of corners for rest.

In their new home, the notions, daylit
from larger windows and an eastern exposure,
gleam in brighter tones.

She chooses a spot on a floor.
She crosses her legs.
She keeps her eyes open, lids relaxed.
She expands her lungs.

Enter a cleaner oxygen.

We can live in her neighborhood
—or a town not too distant.



For 30+ years, Pamela Hobart Carter taught science, art, and preschool. On the side she wrote plays, poems, fiction, and non-fiction. Now she writes full-time and teaches on the side. A dozen of her plays have been read or staged in Seattle (where she lives), Montreal (where she grew up), and Fort Worth (where she has only visited). She has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize and has two poetry chapbooks: *Her Imaginary Museum*, Kelsay Books, 2020, and *Held Together with Tape and Glue*, Finishing Line Press, 2021. PHC has two degrees in geology—from Bryn Mawr College and Indiana University.

FEAR FROM FRIGHT

BY DAVID P. MILLER

I carried rubber gloves as prophylactics
against alien doorknobs. We scrubbed
our groceries, panicked that our plague
might be as much attached to fomites
as to aerosols. I couldn't quite believe
that still-warm laundry would corrupt
after resting on an unsterilized tabletop.
I also didn't disbelieve it.

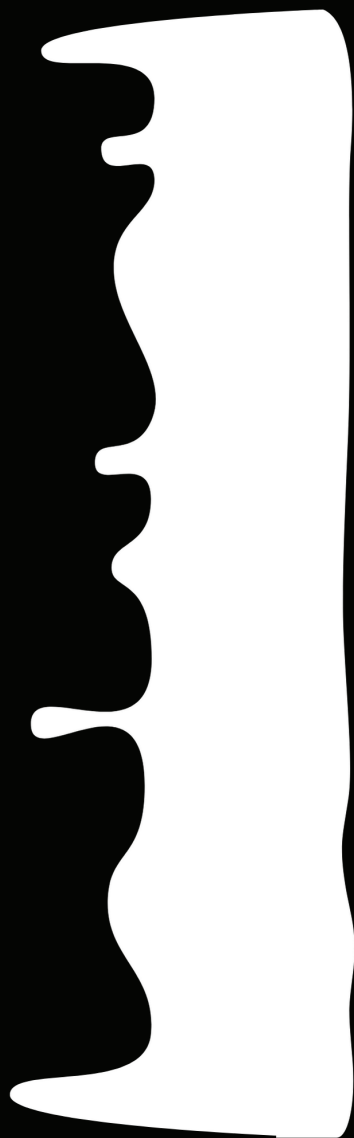
May I allow myself a modest smile for
the physical dread we handed, one to one?
In place of *homo sapiens'* religion of
raw dominance over matter,
the repressed returned. Every sugar bowl,
subway strap, conspired to smother us,

innocent in bed. Compare and contrast
1) my death, irrelevant to this teakwood coaster
2) slow mass suicide, by fathers, mothers,
worshippers who gunpoint caution,

force it off the premises. *When I have fears
that I may cease to be:* dear Keats, what may?
You did. I will.

But greater than that fear
is chronophobia, the terror of each good-night
kiss, dog walk, sandwich, those many seconds
closer to a lunchless, laughless, terminal,
blank. I tell myself, spare yourself

from the fright of life. For November dew-streaked
windows, for this almost-solid body, be rescued.



David P. Miller's collection, *Bend in the Stair*, was published by Lily Poetry Review Books in 2021. *Sprawled Asleep* was published by Nixes Mate Books in 2019. Poems have recently appeared in *Meat for Tea*, *Hawaii Pacific Review*, *Turtle Island Quarterly*, *Clementine Unbound*, *Constellations*, *J Journal*, *The Lily Poetry Review*, *Ibbetson Street*, *Redheaded Stepchild*, *The Blue Pages*, and *What Rough Beast*, among others. His poem "Add One Father to Earth" was awarded an Honorable Mention by Robert Pinsky for the New England Poetry Club's 2019 Samuel Washington Allen Prize competition. He was a librarian at Curry College in Massachusetts, from which he retired in June 2018.

So many things are happening. So many things keep happening you wouldn't believe it. Or maybe you would. The snow was bad in the Southtowns last night. Do you know about those kinds of things? I've just finished Ammons' *Garbage* and I've folded down the corner on the page where he says *life is not first for being remembered but for being lived!* But here I am lost in the remembering again, pressing two fingers deep into the scar tissue that's formed over my sternum from trying so hard to reach you. An ache for so long. Single digits today and sunny. Snow falls and flies in murmurations from the pines behind the house almost giving rise to something solid I can hold on to. My friends from college keep telling me I'm too old to be listening to Taylor Swift but they can't stop me; I have Amazon unlimited now on all my devices. I don't think I see you at the bus stop anymore, but I can't untether you either from those heavy bands of lake-effect snow, the coming spring, or the pain in my chest I can count on to flare up (smoke & falling gold dust, sparkling bangs) on those first hot sweet summer nights of July.





Postcard from
Where You are Not

By Susan Barry-Schulz

Q U I E T

By Susan Barry-Schulz

—a golden shovel after Diane Seuss' *frank: sonnets* pg 37



Let me first say I never knew if
you left me or I left you.
My therapist wants me to consider what it is that I want
and I tell her I think it's a toasted pumpkinnickel bagel with butter but I can't because of the
celiac and all. In my mind, I'm already unfolding the wax paper and inhaling the grand
aroma so I miss what she says next. If there is a prize
for charming patients I want to win it. In the end, I decide that it was you
who left me (after I left you). That must
have been the way things went. I have a desire to be more captivating but I keep
returning to the same old scenes. Like the way a
snowflake caught in the ends of my daughter's red hair made the whole world go quiet.
A flock of temporary diamonds strewn across her troubled shoulders. Never mind.

Susan Barry-Schulz grew up just outside of Buffalo, New York. She is a licensed physical therapist living with chronic illness and an advocate for mental health and reducing stigma in IBD. Her poetry has appeared in *New Verse News*, *SW-WIM*, *Barrelhouse* online, *Nightingale & Sparrow*, *Shooter Literary Magazine*, *The Wild Word*, *Kissing Dynamite*, *Bending Genres*, *Feral*, and elsewhere.

BREATH OF BREATH, SIGHING SIGH

By James Bradley

There are times when the gulf is wide, a leap seeming
Existential vertigo, acute, positively unforeseeable, &
excessively desperate, the circumspect island of self
brought on by an abrupt turn or whim of circumstance,
as inaccessible as the white powder bedding beneath
must never compel one to succumb to some temptation,
a slumbering snow leopard. Love, in unity, intricacy
of stark banality one would otherwise have possessed,
and ferocity, its cold, white snout smeared with fresh
in adequate quantity, the requisite strength to withstand.
warm blood, is the dream bridge which belies waking,
Breath of Breath, Sighing Sigh. The singular intricacy,
the thread of a consciousness dislodged from the ice,
of a given situation, like a finely woven, irreplaceable
arred ever so slightly out of fair Ariadne's sharpened
tapestry of snowflake, may seem to necessitate certain,
needle's eye, the snowflake unable to reconcile itself
how shall I say ? delicate interpretations, a soft touch
with the looming population explosion of the blizzard.
hitherto unrequired of one, a truly masterful handling
At times the infirmity is the cure, the storm is the eye,
one may feel to be beyond one's capacity to improvise
the melody has a way of resolving itself in the midst
under even the most favorable of conditions, let alone
of the furthest throes of cold, thunderous cacophony.
in the midst of a sudden & debilitating disorientation
Homeopathic Lord, at this deepest of crises, sacrifice
caused by the onset of spacial ambiguity, the shifting
at that sacral crossroads of the cross-eyed Golgotha,
of the old, familiar philosophical rug of one's footing,
we offer up the lamb of vertigo to thee in the name
tugged taut through the space between woven thread
of all-blessed union; *Breath of Breath, Sighing Sigh*.
of a onetime recognizably cross-stitched metaphysics.

James Bradley is an artist and writer living in Portland, Oregon. His paintings have been exhibited at the Berkeley Art Museum, Verum Ultimum Gallery, P.Bibeau and elsewhere. He received an MFA in painting from the California College of the Arts in 2009.

Afterwards, the women

By Jen If

dumb-unknowing
two-against-one
futile

face jabbing fists

while tiles
nose
blood body wall,

drains in the floor;

spat in and
 and spat

After

 heart blood spread,
 slit of my eye slid shut

Two women
 beige
Picked

Turned
Inspected

 drugged
 fetched
 nothing had

Nothing happened nothing happened nothing happened nothing

thanked them).

Who were they?



Jen If (she/her) writes poetry and prose from life experience about torture and sexual violence. She has a BA in English and an MA in Creative Writing.

Age is Just a Number

By Valerie Sopher

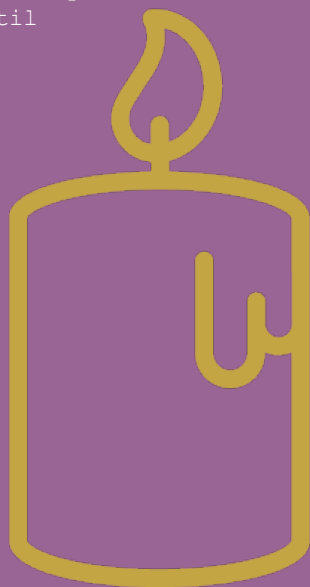
in the Botanical Garden, it's safe
from people, if you choose the right path
there is an illegal amount of beauty here
hills fold into the canyon, disappearing
into a distant gauze-wrapped city
in the Garden of Old Roses, a dormant flower misses
its second bloom, rivulets run into Strawberry Creek
on the ridge top, buzz cut trees trimmed by the wind
amid this enchantment
loneliness clings like lichen

confused blooms stop opening on a day
that got lost in winter and found spring
unsafe under a cloudless sky
forty days without rain
only the Cloud Forest holds
the illusion of water

too many people pass too close
too many unmasked, too many
conversations not about plants
a man stops to catch his breath
this is a place for the older, not the elderly
when did I become one and how long until
I will be the other, unable to manage
deep, uneven steps on winding paths
to beckoning benches

today is my birthday
I face the conundrum
of how to celebrate myself
a Monkey Puzzle Tree day
so I come here, on a morning
too early for shadows and scents
from blooms just beginning
if you ask me what I wish for
I wish for rain

years ago a magician asked me to pick
from the fanned deck he held out
a card that would show the age
I would live to
I chose a number so far in the future
it was one I could live with
keep it a secret or you'll spoil the trick



now that number is a touchable age
my earth has tilted on its axis
and I face the moon
when it shifts again and the magician holds up
a card - *is this the number you picked?* -
I hope to say it doesn't matter
because I knew the Queen of Hearts
danced with the Jack of Diamonds

as I leave the garden, throaty toads sing
in reeds mired in velvet pond scum
hesitation hides in the Cactus Garden,
spiky and dangerous
I reach one last bench, linger
watch the light play tricks
on mirrored leaves
in the deepening sun

Valerie Sopher lives in the San Francisco Bay Area. She is grateful to Caustic Frolic Slant, Wingless Dreamer (contest winner), Canary and Prometheus Dreaming for publishing her work.



Sarajevo: Three Views on What Forgiveness Means

By Robert Omura

i.

There is a Zen parable about a warrior who slew his master, and to atone for his crime, he dedicated his life to building a tunnel so people could cross a dangerous stretch of mountain. Many years later, the master's son, seeking revenge, found the warrior at work deep in the tunnel. The warrior promised the son that he would gladly die at his hands, but first let him finish the tunnel; the son agreed. After several months the son grew impatient, and to hurry the tunnel along, he began digging too. Years passed and the two men toiled side by side. When the tunnel was done, the warrior turned to the son and said, "Now, I am ready to die." The son replied, "How can I kill you? You are my teacher."

Mountains gold and free –
heavy with a present that
is owned by the past.

ii.

Tiny feet run to catch the tram
skip across the cobbles

with the ease of birds

act as if the past has



no center

no mass.

Even a Pokémon pack

bears no weight.

And the children chirp with delight
stop traffic

with their song.

This is forgiveness.

Old men in clean, white shirts
pressed the night before

smell of lavender

and cigarette smoke

gather

outside the mosque

wave to the afternoon sun like fresh linens
 f l a p p i n g o n a l i n e .

The wind
shakes off
gravity
sheds
old winter coats.

Next to the mosque
young couples and families
for Ramadan

line up

flat bread

like they were
lined up at the cinema.

This is forgiveness.

Daughters of wartime rape
wear black leather jackets
polka dot dresses
push strollers
through the city park
and are never seen
just shade their babies' eyes with
open palm.

Pigeons and prayers swirl
above
the old square and coo
feathers are softer than
truth and
lighter than
justice.

This is forgiveness.

Red roses in mortar scars gain a foot in the market.
 Peace sticks to plaster and wood beams, smells
 of burnt coffee, tastes of barbecued lamb. Sheep
 knock down weeds in rocky fields, trigger a mine
 now and then, so we stick to marked trails around
 the mountain. High up, the bobsled track snakes down
 through thickets with a new promise at every bend.

Many hands had drawn petroglyphs up and down
 the track walls, but graffiti's indecipherable without
 the whole story. And the story evolves. The past, a restless
 dragon, snores and settles in for the night and sometimes,
 the low sun glints off its clay scales to form perfect
 rainbows in the clouds. Old women sleep with one eye open,
 every house has a dog and the dogs bark into the night,
 and the men grumble and try not to sink too low in chairs.



This is Not a Love Song About Water

By Robert Omura

"Let me repeat what history teaches. History teaches." – Gertrude Stein

To write a poem of love you first ascribe:

*Tyrant, lover, white teeth oxide kisses
and more*

*Dissolves hard rock, the putty sky,
slants rain, the animus of kings – of seas –*

Draw a pail of volition from the well:

*Ties up the flame, rebuilds glaciers – yet – but
demands of light,*

"Yield and bend to my will!

Without my word! No one shall live through me!"

The third, imply the source of all your doubts:

*O Such pretense! Who worships such a god?
Can I see true with you in my gray eyes?*

Newborns may thrive, after, when cord is cut – has cut.

At last – and then – the spill: Who serves whom, dear?

Your nature is to rule – to rue; and mine, oppose.



Robert K. Omura calls Calgary, Alberta, Canada home where he lives with his common law wife and three too many cats. He has resigned himself to finding cat fur in everything he eats. His fiction and poetry appears or is forthcoming in journals in the U.S., Canada and abroad including the New York Quarterly, 34thParallel, Chaffin Journal, CLR, Freshwater, barnstorm, and Blues Skies Poetry. He has been nominated for the Pushcarts. he same as above only with faces.

A Compendium of Gases at Room Temperature in a Transitive State

By Robert Omura



Forgiveness

recognition there is no fault, only stars
and there will be broken glass and bruised knees.
it is the bored puppy and a favorite pair of shoes
a kindness to yourself in water and light
an open window into another's pain
knowing that the baby and the bassinet are you.

Gratitude

seeps under doors, hides in pipes like thieves.
it is the cure for feeling and a suicide by shame
the prescription of hemlock and the holy grail
a reason to shun psychobabble and take up golf.

Happiness

not just birds in the trees but also the song,
the click of the door after a long work week
even a steaming cup of coffee and a day to yourself
but not holding hands in public or waiting your turn
for the bathroom (and definitely not a relationship).
a relationship can never be happiness, just as a bank
account is not wealth, but one often holds the other.

Hope

the AI voice that makes you wait on hold for an hour
prompts you to push "I" to speak with a live agent
then sends you back to the start menu again.
it is the runaway train and the brake handle
the cat staring out the door and the falling snow
the worst excuse for getting up in the morning.

Ikigai

comes from being both the river and in it:
the thrash of wild salmon and a thousand splendid trees
the dance of water bugs and the splash of hungry fish
the ecstasy of raindrops yielding to the roof.

Love

a toppling over, an accident waiting to happen:
the broken board covering the bridge and the ambulance
the grind when ice cracks and the flash of heat on open skin
the slippery street during a snowstorm and the plow,
the whelp that wakes the whole neighbourhood
while paddling for traction before the fall that is your own.

Sex

the same as above only with faces.

DEPTHS / ACROBATICS

BY LINDA MCCAULEY FREEMAN

I

When I was
little my brother
and I would climb
down the ladder
at the deep end
of the pool. Whoever
went deeper, held

longer underwater
won. Water pushed
me up as I pushed

myself down, my

long hair swimming
above me, cheeks

puffing. I am afraid
of drowning.

I would always be first
to break surface,
wait for my brother
to rise.

II

My husband
and I walk
the drained
reservoir:
What's left
crosses us:
stone
foundations,
wooden boats,
an old blue bottle.

Ice chimes tingle
across broken
water:

My husband
goads me,
urges
rock to rock.

I toss
the bottle to him.
It crashes
against stone.

III

Skiing,
I went without
fear
but found it
in my knees
which shook

uncontrollably.
Knew with each
turn, I would fall.

To lose control

is to fall.

IV

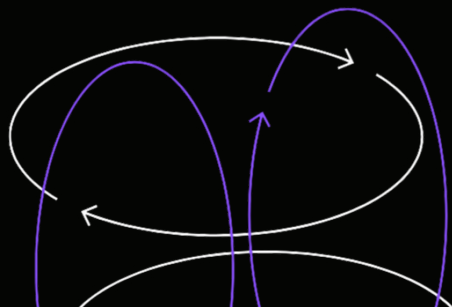
What I need
And what I have
hang
on a trapeze
I cannot
grasp one

without
abandoning
the other. I want

to release

mid-air;
live in the gasp
between

letting go
and getting
caught.



POMEGRANATE

By Linda McCauley Freeman

I

I put the red wet seed into your mouth
my fingers lingered between your lips
your fingers in my mouth
our tongues tasting flesh fruit
I hardly knew you
we became fingers over tongues
dipping into fruit
neither of us had ever tasted.

II

You are the tongue
in my ear caress that leaves me
bruised I cannot say how
this happened except
that I planned it looked for it
as long ago as when he first
rolled away from me
when I wanted him
and when I asked him
if I should take a lover
only laughed thought he
knew me from my heart
thought that would keep
my body still now it is after
and I can feel my toes again.

III

Kissed so strong the skin
blued you are loud in my ear
your name circling my head
I cannot push you away
now that you are not here
just as I could not push you away
when you were.

IV

I draw inside my mouth
a river of you, your body be
coming inside. Our love
wrapped in flowers, hidden
in a deep divide. There is
a void lush as we sink
into the soft grass, spent
and panting.



Stoke a fire
make me glisten
under your hands
rough where the wood
edged calluses square and wide
move me like a lathe
splinter me.

V

You put your cold hand in my coat pocket,
feel my leg through the torn lining.
“You have a hole in your pocket,” you tell me.
If you were my husband, I would praise you
for pointing out the obvious. But you are not
my husband, who would never put his hand
in my pocket. Because you are who you are
and not who you are not, I say,
“That makes it big enough for both of us,”
and join your hand in my pocket.

VI

I hold my heart in chunks in my hand
I want to be with you wake in your arms
feel your chest hair under my fingers
your heart beating repeating

I love you I love you

to bathe in the deep tub of your love
let you lather me with more

than I have ever known

but I look at my husband
feel the old bearded love

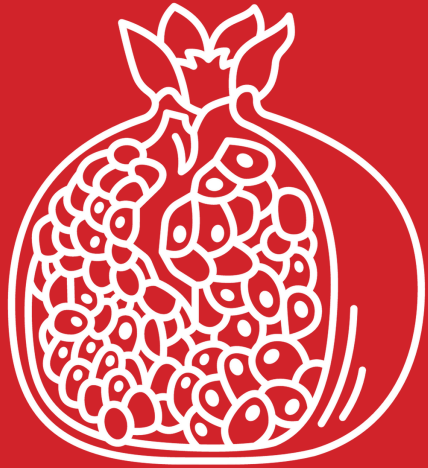
that hope of *if only*
against the sure fire of you.

VII

You can't see the scar over my heart
for years my husband
ran a locomotive over those tracks
and I hung on through tunnels
for the brief moments
we exploded into daylight

but this metaphor is weary now

I need to find the exit
get help with my baggage.



Linda McCauley Freeman is the author of the full-length poetry collection *The Family Plot* (Backroom Window Press, 2022) and has been widely published in international journals, including in a Chinese translation. She was nominated for a Pushcart Prize 2022. Recently she appeared in *Delta Poetry Review*, *Poet Magazine*, *Amsterdam Quarterly*, and won Grand Prize in *StoriArts' Maya Angelou* poetry contest. She received a grant from Arts Mid-Hudson and was selected for *Poets Respond to Art 2020, 2021 and 2022* shows. She was a three-time winner in the *Talespinners Short Story* contest judged by Michael Korda. She has an MFA from Bennington College and is the former poet-in-residence of the Putnam Arts Council. She lives in the Hudson Valley, NY. Follow her at www.Facebook.com/LindaMcCauley-Freeman.

Fwd: “**Extreme Heat Advice - Department of Health - New York State**”

By Eleonor Botoman

Know the signs of heat-related illness

one day, it'll be so hot
all the insects in the neighborhood
will goey up into a
crackling molasses of wings

Check your local weather so you can be prepared.

shredded up into their own iridescence
welding splintered thorax
to antennae crisped and boiled
into a humid lump of feeling

Find a place to get cool.

how that deathly caramel
will slide onto the crackling streets
how those bodies of liquified pollen
will still smell so sweet



Eleonor Botoman is a critic and poet based in Brooklyn, New York. Her writing has appeared in C Magazine, Artforum, Dream Pop Journal, Sunlight Press, BUST Magazine, The Mantle, and more. A former sketchbook librarian, she now studies in NYU's Experimental Humanities program. When she's not reading science fiction or visiting museums, she's working on her newsletter, Screenshot Reliquary.



Fiction



Lana

By Chris Belden



Lana had not spoken in so long that her throat felt swollen. For almost two weeks she'd gone about her day nodding or shaking her head, gesturing with a hand, rolling her eyes. At meals, she had to point to the salt and mime sprinkling it on her bland food. If she needed to use the bathroom during prayer sessions, she'd raise her hand and wave toward her crotch. In three days, Lana would be permitted to speak out loud again—but by then, if all went as planned, she'd have escaped this place.

Eleven days ago, Lana called Miss Wittig a stupid cunt. Miss Wittig had threatened to extend Lana's time here at God Loves Teens because Lana had not cleaned the bathrooms for two days. She'd been on "bathroom sparkle" duty for more than a month and was past due to be rotated to "meditative yard work," or maybe "loaves and fishes" (kitchen) duty, and so had declared herself on strike. Miss Wittig skipped over any sort of negotiation to immediately threaten Lana with added time, and Lana lost her shit. Several of the girls witnessed the exchange. Some smiled and enjoyed the vicarious thrill of seeing Miss Wittig physically recoil at the insult. All the girls turned away when Miss Wittig slapped Lana across the face and ordered her to her room.

"Two weeks of 'Silence' will be your punishment," Miss Wittig had hissed at Lana's indifferent, retreating back. "And one more month of bathroom duty." Since then, Lana had not uttered a word but carried on a non-stop monologue in her mind.

While the other girls attended mass in town, she stayed behind, and as she scraped the shit from the white porcelain bowls, she narrated a scene of herself on her knees licking Miss Wittig's engorged clitoris, torturing that woman until she bucked and brayed on the verge of orgasm, and Lana would abruptly withhold her tongue until Miss Wittig begged and denied the existence of God. By the time the toilets had been scrubbed to a gleam, Lana's face equally glowed.

Lana was plump and moon-faced, with freckles and reddish-blond hair that had been short, almost a buzz cut, upon entering the camp but now hung to her shoulders. Her parents had read her journal in which she recounted an affair with a sophomore girl named Rita Totten using words like *smooth thighs*, *pink nipples*, and *wispy pubic hair*. One night at three in the morning, two men woke Lana from a deep sleep and pulled her from her bed. Having recently borrowed *In Cold Blood* from the library, Lana expected violent death, but this was worse. The men dragged her past her stone-faced parents to a maroon van and drove several hours to a remote farmhouse surrounded by an electrified fence. She was given a bible and a printed list of rules that included:

- No cursing.
- No singing.
- No phones, tablets, or computers.
- No reading (except the Bible).
- No touching of your fellow camp members.
- No going outside without permission from staff.

The girls were not allowed to wear their own clothing. Instead, they wore plain slacks and tops donated by a local church. They were issued the cheapest canvas sneakers, and the underwear consisted of old lady panties and battle-ax brassieres. Breaking rules resulted in silencing, extra chores, postponement of release, not to mention endless chastisement often accompanied by brooding disapproval from the rest of the girls.

For several hours a day, including Sunday, Lana and the others were lectured to about the evils of drugs, alcohol, and sex. Especially sex.

I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, that you not stir up or awaken love until it pleases.

Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous.

While the staff went on and on about the perils of sex, Lana would turn the pages to the Song of Solomon and read, *Oh, may your breasts be like clusters of the vine, and the scent of your breath like apples, and your mouth like the best wine*, and she would remember Rita Totten's sweet breath on her neck. At those moments, she felt separate from the other girls and this place, less a captive

to God Loves Teens than a captive to her own body and desires, and thus, in a funny way, she felt free.

Talk was discouraged among the girls, so Lana didn't know for sure why some of the others had been sent here, but she prided herself on an instinct about such things. For instance, she knew Taylor McGlinnen had an oxy problem from the way she jittered around, and that Olivia Warden was boy-crazy by the way she acted around Hector, the handyman. And of course, there were the pregnant girls, whose round, bulging sins strained the cheap donated sweat pants they wore.

The other girls had good instincts too. For example, they caught on pretty quick that Lana was a dyke by the way she rolled her eyes at their pathetic longing for lost boyfriends and makeup and short skirts. Her parents had wanted a feminine daughter that cowered at loud noises and conflict, and for years she'd tried to accommodate them, wearing flouncy dresses and ponytails. She even took ballet lessons, but she often found herself entranced by the other dancers as they preened and stretched their lithe bodies on the barres. When she quit ballet, her mother cried.

The God Loves Teens girls were not permitted to communicate with the outside world except via landline to their families for ten minutes on Sundays. A staff member observed all phone calls to make sure the girls did not reveal any secrets. On her first call, Lana had blurted out that she'd hadn't been allowed outside all week, and that it was pretty funny that they'd sent her here to stop being queer when half the staff was obviously muff divers.

Miss Wittig slammed her shapely index finger down on the phone button and forbade Lana any calls for two weeks.

"I don't care," Lana told her. "I don't want to talk to those idiots anyway."

Lights out arrived promptly at nine p.m. The girls slept in bunk beds, four to a room. The bedroom doors had been removed and the fluorescent hall light remained on so that the night staff could keep watch. No talking, no reading, and obviously, no sex. One of the girls next door was caught masturbating and for the next two weeks, she had to sleep on a sofa downstairs where the staff spent the night watching religious programs on TV at an absurdly high volume.

Lana's escape plan started to form the first time she had yard duty. While she and two other girls raked leaves into large piles for burning, Lana noted the various details of the landscape—the tall electrified fence, the entry gate through which cars came and went, the fields that surrounded the compound, and the woods that lay to the north. She saw no neighboring homes, no barns or outbuildings. The entry gate was chained and padlocked. She assumed Miss Wittig and the other ladies each had a key, as well as Hector, who did not live at the camp but came and went as needed. Same for Scott and Les, the two goons who occasionally delivered girls in the maroon van.

If she could somehow snatch a gate key, Lana figured, she could make a run for it. She spent endless religious lectures daydreaming of the long sprint across the field, the safety of the woods, the life she'd make for herself on the other side. She'd steal some money from the staff to buy a bus ticket to one of those oddly named places that had long intrigued her: Kalamazoo, Cucamonga, Needles. There she'd find a dull job and otherwise live a life of shameless debauchery.

At first, she planned to make a run for it while on yard duty, but she now deemed it too risky—the other girls would shout, the staff would give chase in a van or car, plus who knew when she'd get yard duty again? No, she would have to escape in the dark.

At night she lay awake in her bunk, timing the staff routine. Someone, usually Miss Whitehouse, peeked into the rooms every half hour or so—Lana timed it by the number of commercial breaks in between bunk checks. Miss Whitehouse was a big woman who wore thick glasses and moved slowly, wheezing with each step. Lana figured she could fool her by stuffing her bunk with clothes to look like she was sleeping under the blanket.

One night, in between Miss Whitehouse's checkups, Lana snuck from the bedroom to the top of the stairs and listened to the night watch team. After her rounds, Miss Whitehouse collapsed on the sofa and chatted with Miss Adolph. This went on until Miss Whitehouse was ready to make the rounds again.

The following night, Lana crept halfway down the stairs and peeked into the living room where the two women sat, careful to avoid the one creaky step near the top. Next to Miss Whitehouse on the sofa lay her purse; Miss Adolph's hung from the back of her chair. While Lana watched, Miss Whitehouse nodded off, her head dipping to her large bosom. A moment later, Miss Adolph stood and

went to the bathroom. Lana could easily have walked down the stairs, stolen Miss Adolph's purse, and quietly exited out the front door. If she'd been prepared, she would have done that very thing, but she wore only her itchy, donated pajamas and had not prepped herself mentally. She had a feeling this opportunity would present itself again.

The next day, while Lana scraped dried toothpaste from the sink in the upstairs bathroom, Miss Wittig appeared in the doorway.

"Well, Lana, have you learned your lesson yet?" she asked from the doorway. Forbidden to speak, Lana just stared expressionlessly.

"Tomorrow I'll lift your Silence," Miss Wittig said, "if you agree to use your voice to speak to the other girls about the lessons you've learned from this little episode."

Before she could prevent it, Lana's right eyebrow rode up to produce one of her more typical expressions. The literal translation: What the fuck?

"I might even consider moving you off bathroom sparkle duty if you do a good job," Miss Wittig added. She leaned against the doorframe and crossed her arms under her breasts (*like clusters of the vine*). Lana pictured her naked and felt her mouth go dry.

"Sleep on it," Miss Wittig said, "and we'll see how we feel tomorrow morning." She turned to leave, then turned back. "You know, Lana, you remind me a lot of me when I was your age. Stubborn, rebellious, angry. But I see a lot of potential in you."

She permitted herself a half-smile before leaving. For the hundredth time, Lana wondered what had brought Miss Wittig to God Loves Teens in the first place. She hardly dared to imagine that fifteen-year-old Miss Wittig had licked a girl's pussy, though of course, that's exactly what she imagined, much like Lana had licked Rita Totten's pussy after school one day at Rita's house. Did Miss Wittig enjoy it as much as Lana had? Had she written about it in her diary using florid language to describe the feeling? Had her parents been mortified enough to arrange for a three a.m. kidnapping?

Picturing Miss Wittig going down on a girl who very much resembled herself, Lana shut the door, turned on the sink, and played with herself until one of the other girls banged on the door to come in and take a shit.

That night, Lana lay in bed fully clothed, the covers pulled up to her chin. Lana wished she had a friend to escape with, an accomplice. She'd considered asking the girl who slept on the lower bunk across from her now, Sadie Lasick, but God Loves Teens was so effective at sowing suspicion among the girls that no one trusted anyone else with secrets.

Sometime after midnight, once Miss Whitehouse had checked on the girls for the seventh or eighth time and groaned her way back downstairs, Lana carefully peeled off her bedcovers and tip-toed to the doorway. She wore her sneakers, slacks, and a cheap dark sweater. The other girls in the room breathed deeply as they slept.

Lana peeked into the hall. Harsh fluorescent bulbs illuminated the pinewood floor and unadorned walls. Two other doors led to bedrooms, with the bathroom at the end.

She crept to the top of the stairs. A man's voice shouted from the TV: *Or do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God?* Lana also thought she heard Miss Whitehouse's nasal voice nattering away. She descended several steps and peered over the railing to see the back of Miss Adolph's head as she sat knitting in the chair facing the TV. Miss Whitehouse sat in her usual spot on the sofa.

"Hector is coming early," Miss Whitehouse was saying. "To put in the storm windows. I can't believe it's time again. Seems he just took them off and put in the screens."

She carried on like this while Miss Adolph ignored her. Eventually, Miss Whitehouse pushed herself up off the sofa.

"Well, I s'pose I'll go check on the girls."

Lana ran back to her bunk. A moment later she heard the creaky step and then footfalls in the hall. Even with her eyes closed, she could detect the shadow of Miss Whitehouse looming in the lit doorway. After Miss Whitehouse had checked all three rooms and descended the stairs, Lana again crept from her bed to the stairway.

Miss Whitehouse had returned to the sofa while Miss Adolph continued knitting. She was constantly making baby clothes for newborns of the pregnant girls. This tiny outfit was probably for

the child of Hayley Weisbrod, who was six months pregnant. Poor Hayley, who slept across the hall, still talked about keeping her baby.

After about ten minutes, Miss Whitehouse's round head started to loll until it finally rested on her chest. A moment later, Miss Adolph set down her knitting and climbed from the chair. She was tall and waistless with brown-gray hair pulled painfully into a ponytail. She rarely spoke and had lifeless eyes that either saw through you or took everything in—it was impossible to tell which.

She headed toward the kitchen and, presumably, the bathroom off the back door. Lana moved quickly down the stairs toward Miss Adolph's purse, which hung, as usual, from her chair. With one eye on the snoozing Miss Whitehouse, she opened the purse and gently fingered the contents: keys, tissues, a glasses case, Mace, a flip phone, a thin wallet. Miss Whitehouse snorted, and her head tilted up and back to rest against the sofa. If she woke up, Lana could always tell her she'd gotten her period unexpectedly and couldn't find a Tampon, but Miss Whitehouse's eyes remained shut and her breathing returned to normal. Lana removed the wallet, keys, and Mace and crept toward the front door. From the kitchen came sounds of the refrigerator door opening and plastic containers being set on the counter.

Lana slowly turned the lock on the door and heard the bolt click. Again, Miss Whitehouse snorted on the sofa, and Lana stopped breathing. She took hold of the knob and, while still eyeing Miss Whitehouse, twisted it open. A gust of cold air whooshed into the room. Miss Whitehouse grunted but did not wake. No sound from the kitchen.

Lana stepped onto the porch. For the first time, she felt as though this might work. She eased the heavy front door shut behind her. She crossed the porch through the yellowy light of the overhead lamp, and as she descended the stairs to the cement walk she felt herself swallowed by darkness.

She followed the walk to the gravel parking area. Her footsteps crunched on the pebbles so she kept to the grass at the edges and started up the slight hill leading to the gate. The night was cold and clear, with billions of stars and no moon. Halfway up, she paused to look back at the house. With its lit-up windows—the living room and upstairs hall—it looked like a spaceship floating in the dark. Miss Adolph was probably returning to her chair now, and Miss Whitehouse waking up to check the bedrooms. Choosing to think positively, Lana pictured the old bitty glancing at the form beneath the bed covers and moving on.

At the gate, Lana pulled Miss Adolph's ring of keys from her jeans pocket. There was a thick car key and three others. With shaking hands, she tried the first key: no luck. The next did not fit either. If the third key didn't work, she'd have to find another way. The fence was lined with electrified wire tautly strung just a few inches apart. One of the girls had said this used to be an ostrich farm, to which Lana had said, it still is, meaning everyone here kept their heads in a hole in the ground.

She inserted the third key and it turned with a satisfying click. She removed the chain and pulled the gate open just enough to slip through before reapplying the lock.

She ran.

The field was thick with stiff grass and pocked with holes. Several times she nearly fell but managed to right herself. At first, the woods appeared to remain the same distance off, like some sort of optical illusion, but then the trees loomed over her, dark and thick. At the edge of the woods, she paused once more to look back at the now distant house. While catching her breath, Lana thought of Miss Wittig and realized she'd miss her—the smell of eucalyptus soap on her skin, her dark eyes framed by thick lashes, the rise of her breasts when affronted by bad behavior.

In the woods, she could not see anything but vague vertical shapes, gray against black. She had no idea how deep these woods went or what awaited her on the other side, but she slowly grew accustomed to the darkness and felt more confident about avoiding collisions. While lying in bed at night, Lana would sometimes hear the far-off cries of animals, but tonight, moving quickly among the trees, she heard only the slap of her feet on dead leaves and dirt. She peered around for any sign of life, a fox or a possum, but saw none. Growing tired now, she imagined them watching from their dens or the branches overhead, cheering her on.

After what seemed like a long time, she heard the sounds of traffic. She pictured herself hitchhiking, hopping into the car of a nice family, and . . . then what? She realized she had no idea where the nearest bus station was, or even what town she was in. What had always been just a plan was now real. She decided not to think about it—one step at a time.

The woods ended suddenly and Lana faced a steep, grassy hill leading up to the freeway. Lights shone down from tall poles onto the cars and trucks that Lana could hear roaring up above. The noise increased as she climbed up the steep hill to the shoulder of a four-laner. At this time of early morning—Lana figured it might be five or so—she saw mostly trucks, huge eighteen-wheelers headed wherever trucks go. In five minutes she counted maybe four cars.

Lana felt invisible in the dark space between the freeway lamps. She also felt cold. The truck cabins and car interiors, vaguely lit by red or blue dash lights, looked warm and inviting. Lana had only hitch-hiked once before, maybe a year ago, to visit a girl named Aynsleigh Simmons. They'd spent the afternoon talking about school and watching porn, and when Lana touched her friend's cheek Aynsleigh had pulled back with a shocked look on her pretty face and told Lana she'd better leave. Lana walked the five miles home, cursing herself for pushing too hard.

The sky lightened from black to gray-blue, with a band of pale yellow along the eastern horizon. Behind Lana, the woods gradually transformed from a black wall into individual trees, while beyond the freeway the rolling land took on shape. She made out fields and farmland and, far off, a silo.

She had no sooner stepped toward the side of the road than a non-descript sedan yanked itself out of traffic onto the shoulder. In the dawn light, the car looked gray or maybe green. When Lana got close, the driver's side door opened and a woman stepped out. It took a moment for Lana to recognize her.

Miss Wittig held out her hands as if to say, Don't run.

"Lana. Please get in the car."

She spoke in a stern voice that Lana recognized, but her face showed something new—was it fear? Lana glanced back toward the woods then across the busy freeway. If she timed it right, she could reach the median and then cross the other two lanes and into the fields.

"Don't do it," Miss Wittig said, coming closer. She still held out her hands, pleading. "Just sit in the car with me for a minute. We'll stay right here and talk. I promise, Lana. You can even hold the keys."

Lana considered it. The car looked warm. She was shivering. And suddenly so, so tired.

"Come on, Lana. You're cold. And I have coffee if you want."

Lana nodded. Miss Wittig opened the passenger door for her and tossed some things into the back—gloves, her purse, some paper bags from Dunkin' Donuts. The car smelled of coffee and pine air freshener.

Before Miss Wittig got into the driver's seat, Lana pulled the keys from the ignition and the engine sputtered off. Miss Wittig pressed the hazard button, and the lights clicked rhythmically.

"First, are you okay?" she asked, looking Lana over. It was the first time she'd ever asked that.

The car felt so warm compared to outside, but Lana couldn't stop shivering. "I'm fine," she said. She hadn't spoken in almost two weeks and had to push the words past the lump in her throat.

"You want my coffee?" Miss Wittig held out her cup, but Lana declined. She didn't like coffee.

"Listen, Lana, I know you're unhappy at God Loves Teens. I get it. There's an adjustment period, and for some of us it's longer than for others."

"Us?" Lana said.

"Yes, us. I was like you. I tried to run away, more than once. It took me a while to figure it out."

"Figure *what* out?"

Miss Wittig smiled. She had straight white teeth that reflected the light from the freeway lamp.

"I figured out that I felt safer at God Loves Teens than out here." She gestured toward the traffic just as a semi roared past, rattling the little car. "It's scary out here, Lana. It's cold. Lonely." She smiled again, but in a pitying way. "You're not ready."

With that, Miss Wittig rested her hand on top of Lana's, which lay on her knee. Lana stared down at it, at the soft, smooth pink skin, the manicured nails, the little wrinkles at her knuckles. What was Miss Wittig doing? Lana remembered riding the school bus with Rita Totten, holding hands between their hips and giggling. Lana looked up into Miss Wittig's eyes. They appeared wet as if she might cry.

Lana removed her hand from beneath Miss Wittig's and reached out, cupping the woman's cheek. The skin felt cold but smooth. Miss Wittig's eyes showed confusion, then a flash of anger. She swatted Lana's hand away.

"What're you doing, Lana?"

Lana jerked her hand back and reached for the door handle.

"Lana, don't."

Miss Wittig held onto Lana's arm so she couldn't leave the car.

"Lana, you need to listen to me . . ."

Lana tried to wrench herself free but couldn't. Miss Wittig's fingers dug into her upper arm like a vise. "Stop!" Lana cried.

Miss Wittig grunted with the effort. "You little *bitch*!" she hissed.

Lana reached into her pocket with her free hand. She aimed the Mace at Miss Wittig's face, intending to frighten her, but something about Miss Wittig's expression—defiance? arrogance?—pissed her off, and she pressed the button. Miss Wittig screamed and let go.

Lana climbed out and ran around the front of the car. Without looking, she dashed out onto the freeway. A car skidded from the right lane into the left, narrowly missing the rear of a tractor-trailer. Lana kept going. The headlights of a pickup truck grew large somewhere to her left.

"Lana!" she heard from behind her.

She made it onto the shoulder just as the truck passed. She hopped the guard rail and ran onto the grass median. As she ran, she remembered she still had Miss Wittig's keys. This struck her as funny.

She reached the shoulder of the western bound side and waited this time for a break in traffic before crossing. On the far side, she turned and saw Miss Wittig across the four lanes, standing next to her car. She was rubbing her eyes while trying to operate her cell phone. She was probably trying to call Scott and Les to come with their maroon van. Lana didn't have much time. She flipped Miss Wittig the bird and made a show of tossing the car keys into the middle of traffic. A truck immediately ran them over. Miss Wittig shouted something, but Lana couldn't hear.

The sun was rising now, sending long shadows across the blacktop. Lana no longer felt tired or cold. She turned and started across the wide, open fields.



Chris Belden is the author of two novels, *Shriver* and *Carry-on*, and the story collection *The Floating Lady of Lake Tawaba*. (www.chrisbelden.com).

Schrödinger's Cactus

By Anu Pohani

Erwin Schrödinger devised his thought experiment, now called 'Schrödinger's Cat,' for Albert Einstein. Sitting in the lab, Maya imagined the two gray-haired men lounging together during Erwin's visiting lectures at Princeton in 1935. Sipping iced tea in the shade of a New Jersey oak, they would have discussed the Copenhagen interpretation: that a quantum system remains in superposition until it interacts with or is observed by the external world. Thus, if one were to place a cat and a vial of radioactive elements in the steel cage, one might suppose there is a moment in which the cat is both alive and dead.

Maya understands that it is only a matter of time before things die. But for her, there is a moment where both being alive and being dead are true. Memory stretches this moment to a lifetime sometimes. Parallel universes do exist; String theory is still alive in her universe. The Standard Model and its general acceptance be damned. Maya makes her coffee, thinking these thoughts. Karl Marx famously said, *the seeds of decay are inside something since its inception*. Or maybe they are there even before birth. Her experiment can prove the Marx statement as well.

There was that moment, she thinks as she sips. Sat on a mountaintop, next to him, where she sensed it. She had been afraid for no discernible reason. A beautiful starry night, a fresh blanket of snow, a perfect day. Yet, the fear would not go away. He had known her for but a moment and had followed her (she knew he would). He had said, close your eyes. And she did. Coffee in hand, she closes her eyes, wills herself to remember the cold air in her nostrils. On the mountain, her eyes shut, a parallel future unfolded like a film projected against the inside of her lids. At the end there would be nothing but pain. A searing hot pain. Maya had opened her eyes, smiled at the then near stranger. In that moment of prescience was another equally strong truth. There was nothing she could do to stop what would happen. She couldn't run. In her observable self were the seeds of her own destruction. There was something deadly. Her skeletal cage held the poison and the cat as well. The warmth of his hand held hers, and she squeezed with all her might. A physicist does not believe in clairvoyance. A moment that comes upon so quickly can be a product of the multiverse theory, but who can say. Who can say a stronger Maya does not exist in a parallel universe? A Maya that does not have a desire to be loved, to be approved of, to chase these things to the detriment of herself.

Years unfold. They contain happiness, laughter, lust. The mountain vision nags when Maya has an expectation of a smile, a kiss, a hand to hold. The coffee cools and is forgotten. Its particles sink in their suspension. Computers hum. Simulations run. In the multivariate analysis, there is a version of Maya in a white dress. A picture sits on a piano, a woman in a white dress and a man in a suit, bow-tie long removed, smiling at one another. She can feel it as strongly as she can her presence on a chair in front of a screen, watching the numbers scroll down.

That Schrödinger's Cat is real, that both its simultaneous life and death are also real, must be proven. UV light degrades radioactive substances, a variable easily excluded when testing Schrödinger's Cat. Thus, the lab has no windows to the outside. Similarly, a live cat might be tempted to knock the poison over itself. Another variable, which blurs the point at which all possibilities converge. Thus, Maya replaces the cat with a cactus. She also substitutes the steel box with a glass one for easier observation. She encloses herself and the experiment in a steel room. Directed rays from a special lamp replace sunlight to ensure the cactus receives fuel for photosynthesis. Maya doesn't need to complete the experiment. Her faith in

the multiverse is absolute, despite people's efforts to disprove it. To disprove her. She turns her back on the cactus.

At home, she hangs up her delicates on the clothes horse. The white and blue cage in the living room, draped with things she prefers not to display. She looks up to see him staring.

"What's up?" she says, smiling.

He replies, "Shall we get a take-away tonight?"

In her mind, a moment opens, like a box. Inside he says,

"I've slept with someone else."

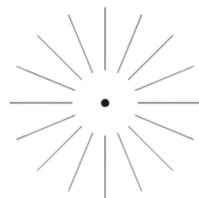
Later that night, lying in bed, Maya grapples with which to believe. Perhaps not one bit of the sentence the Him in the box said had occurred in the observable universe, neither confession nor sexual act. Or, he is having sex with someone else, but said nothing. Or he holds a confession in his heart which he articulated but she pretended not to hear. She reaches a hand to his back. In reality, they order Thai food and watch one of those situation comedies that continues for a few seasons too many. *If only one could simulate all the outcomes.* If Maya could know all the variables, all their measurable values, she could input them into her computer. She strokes the computer with affection, thinking of how it might avert pain. Without pain, there is no knowledge, without death, there is no Experiment. Despite pain, despite suffering, the months and years will be worth it.

Their breakup is nothing if not mundane. However, there is nothing quotidian about the nightly feeling. Despite sleeping alone in an empty bed, each night somewhere between one and four a.m., for a full moment before waking, she feels him lying next to her. He drapes his arm across her midsection. A complete cycle of observations takes several moments: temperature, count of bodies, time on the clock, date on the calendar. Maya positively identifies that he isn't there, and hasn't been for years. Maya turns to the digital lab clock, another observation reading of the cactus and the Geiger counter feeds into the program. The computer is far more accurate, especially since the cat has been replaced. Watching for the moment a cactus dies is impossible for the human eye; Science must provide the answer. Maya imagines opening the glass chamber, replacing cat or cactus. What if she could exist and not exist at the same moment? Would the knowledge be worth the pain? She shakes her head to dismiss the thought, sad but not suicidal. Yet, just like the other moments, it sticks with her. What if she could exist in one plane and not in the other? In the observable universe, the poison will kill her, but there is a measurable moment in time where she is both dead and alive. Surely that is the point of the experiment. To create a split universe of existing and non-existing, even for a moment. She looks at her phone, scrolls through sad, old messages. They are marked with dates and time stamps so far in the past that she invites a parallel universe to exist inside of her. These moments occur within her, again and again.

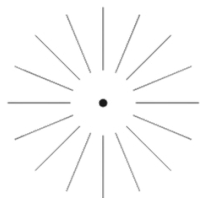
Data arises, the computer alerts her to its completion of the day's observations, analysis, and synthesis. As usual, there is nothing conclusive, but tantalising and confusing. Hours, days, and years churn through. Cacti after cacti are subjected to the experiment. Each time, the cactus dies. Each time, the computer fails to identify a single measurable moment where the cactus is alive and dead. Sometimes it records several, sometimes none at all, yet the death of the cactus is preordained. Maya knows deep in her bones that the pursuit of the truth is worthy. Typing endlessly, finding a retro-fit with mathematics and theory feels like putting order in the cosmos. She hopes for a singular answer like *Decay Start: 12:59:00 EST. Decay Duration: 35 seconds. Death: 12:59:35 EST.* Reaching the end of the day, Maya dons a hazardous materials suit to take apart the experiment. She throws the container with the unstable materials into the safe bin. She throws the cactus in there as well. She wipes down

the Geiger counter and glass with the special surfactant wipes. Finally, she removes the hazardous material suit, and steps back into the observation room. All of her personal belongings including her phone, are left outside this room. For eight hours a day, she is cut off from light from people. She likes it. She chooses it. She will build it back up again tomorrow, she thinks looking at the wall of cacti behind her. The experiment is run at night when vibrations from traffic and overhead planes are non-existent. No extra variables that cannot be accounted for. She keeps odd hours, emerging from the building at six a.m.

Working at the university is just like that. A place that catered to every need, food, exercise, and sleep. In a specially requested dorm room, with an ensuite bathroom, she showers all the indoor-ness away. Maya puts her bathing suit on under her clothes and gets on her bike. At the campus canteen she picks up a strained yoghurt, a pack of almonds, and an apple. From the coffee bar, another coffee, and some cinnamon for the yoghurt; She picks a protein bar for after her swim. For as long as she works on Schrödinger's Cactus, she can eat the same breakfast. Maya swims one kilometre every day. Four hundred metres freestyle, two hundred metres intermediate medley, two hundred metres freestyle, two hundred metres breaststroke. She is enclosed in water enclosed in concrete. Concrete is too porous for the actual experiment. She pulls herself out of the pool. The pool is in darkness, in the basement of the fitness centre. In mid-afternoon, she returns to her single bed. Just before falling asleep she feels the edges of the bed. No room for anyone else. To clear the outdoor-ness, she reads the free novels offered by her eReader; a universe where the characters change, but the stories remain the same. Still, she sees the variants, red hair; brown hair; blue eyes, green eyes, murder by poison, murder by gun, mysteries that resolve in patterns. Surprises without surprises. A single bed, in a single building; She observes her simultaneous life and death, over and over again.



I am an Asian-American expat living in London. I graduated with an Economics major, and an English concentration. With 20 years neck deep in numbers, haplessly mothering two children, I am grateful for the pivot back to right-brain pursuits. My essays and short stories have appeared in Caustic Frolic, Under the Radar and Angel City Review, among others. I can be found on Twitter @AnuPohani. Please feel free to include me on your social media feeds.



Ten Windows

By Eli Coyle

You find yourself stranded on a thawing block of ice in the arctic. You can't remember how you got here, but a polar bear and its cub are approaching from a distance. As they get closer you notice your vision starting to close in, a funnel of darkness kaleidoscopes around you. You're struggling to breathe, to get enough air:



*

The heat is lifting you higher and higher as you sit in the thatched basket of a hot air balloon. Everywhere below you the water is rising. As you look down, you find yourself on the roof of a single story house. The sun is setting a pink cotton haze and in your hand, you hold a red balloon—its weight effortless against the heavy forces of the tide. Suddenly you remember that your wallet is in the truck by the porch. You decide to go look for it, but the truck is taking on water. You try the doors but they are locked.



*

You grow tired as you stand in a long line in a dark city. It has just rained, and the blacktop is glistening like wet obsidian. Everyone in line is wearing masks, but they can't breathe. With them they carry empty containers to fill with water. The man in front of you tells you he is your father. He tells you to fill your container with enough water for the week, but the line isn't moving. Everyone is thirsty and getting irritable. The sky opens but nothing comes out.



*

You're driving in a white truck down a road in the mountains. Smoke is drifting in on a hot breeze and the sky is darkening to a shade of heavy graphite. In the truck with you is a firefighter, but he's never seen fire before. You head deeper into the charcoal painting, the trees like burnt matchsticks. The road is getting hotter and the tires are starting to melt. You see that the road is lifting into the sky. You look to the passenger seat, but the firefighter is gone.



*

In an empty red room with no doors, you find an elephant standing on a small globe. You realize that you've forgotten to feed the elephant, but it's too late. North America has started to glow a neon yellow. The continent is starving. The yellow is spreading south, but the ocean is too bruised and purple.

*

You meet a boy in a yellow raincoat. He has sad eyes, but he tells you where you can find water. You learn that his eyes hold the suffering of the world. He takes you to a vernal pool, but it's empty. It only fills once in a generation. You decide to look for water in the next town over.

*



Below you, everything is barren, devoid of life. You're orbiting the earth in a homemade satellite. Everyone that has ever lived has left the planet. You can't figure out how to fly the satellite and soon you learn that there's a small leak in one of the panels. It's getting harder and harder to breathe. You try to seal the panels with duct tape, but it doesn't hold. You sit next to the air unit trying to breathe in the last of the air.

*



An ephemeral guide is walking you through a golden field. He's taking you to the Tree of Seasons. The left side of the tree shows spring and summer; monarchs migrating on a hot wind. You breathe in deep, life and light. The guide points to the right side of the canopy. The tree has lost its leaves, a cloud of birds in a darkened sky—descending into winter. You feel a cold shift in the wind, the rain turns to snow, and when you look for the guide, there is only a night sky.

*

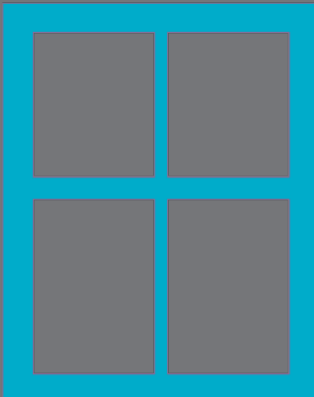


On the beach, you press your feet into black sand. The overcast ocean waves to you in blues and greens. You see a girl in the distance. She's wearing a white dress. When you get closer, you see that her hair carries the color of the ocean. She is building a house out of plastic bottles. You ask her if she is lost—she tells you this is where she lives. Her dress fizzles in the white water of change. When you ask her if she is okay, her house is washed away in a wave.

*



Outside, the air has become light and green. Visions of thistle call to you. Your yellow and black body buzzes while you slowly float towards a taste of lavender. You try to drink the nectar, but there is nothing left. This is the last flower; your only chance at food. You keep drawing, sucking, but nothing comes out.



Eli Coyle received his MA in English from California State University-Chico and is currently a MFA candidate at the University of Nevada-Reno. His poetry has recently been published or is forthcoming in Barely South Review, California Quarterly, Caustic Frolic, The Normal School, New York Quarterly, Hoxie Gorge Review, The South Carolina Review, and Camas among others.



Penances

By Don Noel



Peter seemed insatiable; it was irksome.

Willie had always known, even in his earlier life, that letting anger show was a bad idea. He hadn't been here very long, but he intuited that anger at powerful people up here was an even worse idea. Still, the man kept loading him up with work.

"Willie, call Peter," the pager he'd been given rasped from his hip almost every day. "Call" was not to be taken literally. It meant "go see." Or rather, "go see, *now*!" So Willie would hotfoot over for yet another assignment.

It had begun with his formal admission interview the day after he arrived. "Debt collector," Peter said. He spoke in a flat voice that had none of the resonance one might have expected of the custodian of such famous gates.

He'd hardly looked at Willie because he was busy flicking through what seemed like dozens of pages on an iPad that looked to be at least a generation behind the one Willie had brought with him. Ancient technology, maybe, but it must have had a lot of memory if all those pages being scanned were Willie's life story. And it had everyone else's, too.

Or maybe Peter was downloading stuff from The Cloud. Willie, always technologically challenged, had never understood exactly where The Cloud was. Up here, for all he knew.

"You collected debts," Peter said again. It wasn't a question, but a statement.

"Yes, sir," Willie said, as noncommittally as he could.

"For some bad people."

"Well," Willie said, "I guess you could say that. Nobody's perfect."

"Don't I know. Hmmm. Willie. An unusual name. Is that your given name?"

"No, sir: I was baptized Guglielmo, in Rome."

"By the Holy Father?"

"Oh, no sir: By the local priest. My parents were simple people."

"And how did Guglielmo get to be Willie?"

So Willie explained that his parents emigrated to New York, in the United States, and learned that William—or Bill, or Billy—was the American equivalent of Guglielmo.

"Still, how did that become Willie?"

"When I went to work for the Mafia, sir: The *capo* saw that I was a very small man, and called me 'Wee Willie.' There was a nursery school rhyme."

"I've heard it. 'Runs through the town/in his nightgown,' right?"

"Yes sir: Crying at the locks, and so on. And the name stuck."

"You were crying at the locks of people who owed your boss—*capo*, you said? Money?"

"Yes, sir."

"And there were, how to say it, some ugly threats involved?"

"Yes, sir," Willie said. "Or *no*, sir! I never threatened anyone. Certainly I never harmed anyone. Not a bit, sir: I was never a violent man."

"Of course. Or you wouldn't be up here at all. But some violence ensued."

"Yes, sir: But I never ordered it. The *capo* would ask if I had hit people up, solicited them, I mean, for whatever debt they owed. And he kept track of whether or not they'd paid. If they hadn't, he would send one of his goon squads. I couldn't stop that."

Peter looked down at his iPad. "That is indeed what is recorded here. You have what is sometimes called 'deniability.' But you can't really deny your role. You're guilty of sins. Of triggering sins. Greed, envy, wrath. And you're living in the neighborhood we call Limbo until you expiate those deadly sins."

"I didn't know it had a name, sir, but where I'm living hasn't seemed much like what we've been led to expect. I haven't seen a harp since I arrived yesterday. Or heard any music."

"No," Peter said. "The place won't seem heavenly until you get out of there."

"How do I do that, sir?"

"You earn your way out. You collect debts. That's what we've been talking about, Willie."

"How do I do that, sir?"

"We have people up here who owe us. They're in Limbo, like you, until they discharge their debts."

"They owe you money, sir?"

"No, no, Willie! Of course not. They owe us good works, or sometimes prayers."

"How's that, sir?"

So Peter explained that people went to church—or to a mosque or temple, shrine or shul or synagogue, it didn't seem to matter up here—and promised to do penance, or restitution, if something important happened, usually if a parent or spouse or offspring recovered from an illness.

Sometimes they prayed for more selfish things. If what the penitent wanted was outrageously self-centered—like winning a lottery—it was just ignored. Usually, though, especially if the seeker was truly devout, the prayers were granted, and the debt was noted. Peter seemed deliberately vague about that bookkeeping, but it must be a spectacular system, Willie thought, compared to which his *capo's* record-keeping suddenly seemed stodgy.

Perhaps predictably, Peter explained, some of those obligations were never met. People procrastinated. Perhaps they came up here sooner than they expected, and never got around to it. For whatever reason, here they were, their prayerful promises forgotten or unfulfilled.

"Why are you telling me all this, sir?"

"We want you to collect their debts, Willie. Tell them to carry out their promises."

"And threaten them, sir?"

"Oh, Willie, you've had such a sinful past! Of course not! We don't threaten people. We reward people. You will offer them a reward if they fulfill their pledges."

"What exactly do I offer them, sir?"

A new, better neighborhood, Peter explained. "To be released from Limbo. They all live in your neighborhood, which will make it easy to track them down."

So Willie went home with a list of five sinners.

Sinner One had promised to give \$10,000 to his local hospital. "You gotta make that gift," Willie said when he caught up with him, "or you'll never get out of this crummy neighborhood."

"How am I supposed to do that? I'm up here! I left all my money to my son."

"Enough to give ten grand to the docs?"

"Oh, easy! But how do I make that happen?"

Willie had to go back to Peter for the answer.

"I should have guessed," he told Sinner One when he got back. "You pray that your son makes the gift you forgot."

"What good does that do?"

"I am told," Willie said, phrasing it carefully because he was a bit skeptical, "that prayers from up here are like lightning. Your son will wake up in the middle of the night, hearing your voice telling him. Send a check to the hospital! And he'll send it."

"How will I know that?"

Willie had to go back to Peter again.

"Two ways," he told Sinner One when he got back. "First, your son will pray that you know he's done it. Like lightning again, you'll know. And second, there are people up here who watch this kind of stuff. It's farmed out, apparently. As near as I can make out, it's a kind of mental telepathy. Nobody has much to do up here, so people get an assignment, and they tune in to specific people, like we used to be given links to websites, you know? They report when things get done."

"Wow!" said Sinner One. "That's a little scary!"

"Tell me about it," Willie said. "I used to work for the Mafia. I thought they were good, but they were amateurs compared to up here."

Anyway, Sinner One prayed, his son got the message and sent the check, and in just a few days Sinner One sought Willie out to say goodbye. "Moving to a new neighborhood," he said. "Thanks for the help!"

It was easier after that. Willie had to go back to Peter for detailed instruction now and then, but he got better at it, and before long there were almost a dozen people he'd helped get out of Limbo. The heirs back home had given a lot of money to hospitals and food banks and churches and temples which made Willie proud. There had never been anything altruistic about debt-collecting for the *capo*.

Then came one that flummoxed him. "Promised to pray the Rosary ten times," read the note Peter gave him one morning.

Willie had not been a really practicing Catholic, so he couldn't remember anything about the Rosary, let alone praying it. Toughing things out was part of his character and experience, though, so he sought out the twelfth sinner. "You went to St. Joseph's Cathedral last March," Willie said. "Your wife had been diagnosed with the coronavirus thing."

"I remember," Sinner Twelve said. "They had her on one of those ventilators. The doc said it looked bad. But by the time I got back from the Cathedral to the hospital, she'd rallied. They'd already taken away all the tubes. In a week, I brought her home. It was a miracle."

"Wrong word," Willie said. He marveled at himself for having gotten the patter down so well. It was as though he'd been taking locution lessons from Peter. "It was an answer to your prayers, wasn't it?"

"Of course," Twelve said. "That's what I meant."

"Was there anything you promised to do, back in the Cathedral?" Willie asked. He tried to make it sound like a real question, even though he had the answer in his pocket.

"Oh . . . yesss," Twelve said slowly. "I think I promised to pray The Rosary if my wife was spared."

"Just once?"

"No, I guess I said ten times."

"And did you?" Willie asked, still trying to sound as though he didn't already know.

"No, I guess not."

"Aha!" said Willie. "Have you noticed that where we are right now isn't what you'd expected?"

"I've been wondering. Didn't know who to ask."

"Ask me," said Willie. "You're in Limbo, because you haven't done what you promised, back there in the Cathedral. Fulfill your pledge, guy, and you're outta here."

Twelve's shoulders sagged. "Do you have any idea how long that will take?"

"No idea," Willie said. "I hadn't been to Mass since as a teenager I . . . let's say I committed my first big sin . . . anyway, I haven't been in a long time. But it can't take too long, can it?"

"Wait a minute," Twelve said. He went into his bedroom, and came back with a thick sheaf of papers. "Listen!" he said to Willie, and began to read.

It was an impressive prayer. Willie knew what a *Sign of the Cross* meant, but that was followed by things called *The Apostles' Creed*, an *Our Father*, a bunch of *Hail Marys*, a *Glory Be*, and then a Mystery. "Ten points in a Mystery," Sinner Twelve said. "I'm supposed to meditate on each one, with more Hail Marys, and a Spiritual Fruit, which is a Grace, and then a Glory Be, and an *Oh My Jesus*."

"That'll take a little time," Willie acknowledged.

"A little? That's only one Mystery. There are five to meditate on."

Willie wasn't going to be dissuaded. "Look, guy. You promised."

"I was a busy man. Trying to keep a business running in a pandemic, you know? Family duties. Things kept coming up."

"You procrastinated."

"I did."

"Listen," Willie said, "You enjoying it up here?"

"Well, it isn't what I expected."

"There are better neighborhoods up here."

"How do I arrange to move? Are there real estate agents?"

"You busy?" Willie persisted.

"No, not exactly. There's no TV, and nothing to stream on my Chromebook, and no plays or concerts. I

don't want to complain, but there's nothing to do."

"Aha!" said Willie again. "So, you've got lots of time to pray all those Rosaries!"

"Are you going to sit here and listen so they'll know I've done it?"

"No way. They've got their eye on you already. Can you knock it out by the end of the day?"

"I don't think that's possible," Twelve said. "It will take a couple of days to do it right. Long days. Are you sure I have to?"

"Do it." Just as had become his habit, he added, "Maybe by the end of the week, at the latest, you'll be looking for me to say goodbye."

With which, Willie left the man to his Rosaries and went straight to Peter, trying not to let his annoyance show: "Can I have a few minutes, sir?"

"What is it, Willie?" Peter had been thumbing through that ancient iPad. He seemed distracted when he looked up.

"Remember, sir, I told you I did the *capo's* debt-collecting, but never caused anyone grief myself?"

"Yes, you said that."

"It's a matter of conscience, sir. Not to make anyone do anything I wouldn't want to do myself."

Peter's brow furrowed. "What is it you're getting at?"

"That fellow who didn't say the Rosaries, sir? That's pretty heavy, in my book."

Peter sighed audibly. "It was his own idea, Willie. We didn't suggest those prayers; he volunteered."

"Still, sir, it will take him days. Maybe all week, without much of a break."

"Willie, there are people up here who have even longer prayers. The Catholics don't have a lock on the long-winded. You should see some of them from other parts of the world."

"Sir, maybe so, but in any case, can you assign any missed prayers to someone else?"

"You don't want to accept those opportunities for expiation?"

"No, sir. I'd much rather not."

"Oh, Willie, you are such an imperfect instrument!"

He suddenly became aware that Peter was peering intently at his legs. "Is there something wrong with my trousers, sir?"

"I'm looking at the knees. They're not worn, are they?"

Willie looked down, perplexed. "Worn, sir? You mean like worn out?"

"They don't look as though you'd ever knelt in those trousers."

"Knelt? No, sir, I thought I'd told you I never liked being so short. I have to look up at people even when I'm standing as straight as I can. Let alone kneeling."

"Oh, dear!" Peter looked down at his iPad, and then fixed his gaze behind Willie, where it seemed others were waiting.

Willie wasn't going to let himself be brushed aside. "And sir, if you don't mind, how long will it be to earn my way to a better neighborhood?"

Peter sighed again and looked down at his iPad. He seemed to thumb through several pages, and finally looked up.

"You go along now, Willie. We'll call when we need you."

His shoulders sagged as he trudged off. It was a revelation, and hardly the conclusion he'd hoped for: He might not have to learn the Rosary like poor Twelve, but if he was going to get the heavenly Mafia off his back and move to a better neighborhood, he would have to re-learn some lessons forgotten in childhood.

Otherwise, he said out loud to himself, "You don't have a prayer, Willie."



Don Noel is retired from four decades' prizewinning print and broadcast journalism in Hartford CT. He took his MFA in Creative Writing from Fairfield University in 2013, and has since published more than five dozen short stories, including two in *Caustic Frolic*, all of which can be read at his website, <https://dononoel.com>.

Divine Intervention

By J.W. Huff

Actually, Adam sinned a lot. Until the apple debacle, he hadn't been caught. But he had not known the implications of his fleshly actions, either. He was simply taking inventory of them: hedging bets with the pigeons, smoking grass with the monkeys, exploring Eve's body... all in the name of discovery. Had that not, in the final analysis, been his task, to name and to know? He was just another animal. He was new at this. But bliss—maybe it was in not knowing.

Anyway, he couldn't have asked: On the seventh day, when God slept, He slept for weeks, not to be bothered. What would be simply was. Days in the garden passed in carefree splendor and Adam and Eve went on enjoying themselves. They could hardly be blamed for believing that's what this life was all about. And anyway, there hadn't been ill-intent. *That had to count for something*, he thought. Apparently not. That damned apple. *And where was Eve?* he wondered.

"Adam," a sharp voice barked.

"Hm?" he grunted. He had not been listening. It was all too much.

"Tell us a little about yourself, Adam," Judith said.

Adjusting the stones strung around his neck, he sat up straighter in his metal folding chair. "I'm Adam," he said to the circle of the first terrace. He looked around expectantly.

Those who could raise their heads stared at him blankly. Stones clanked.

"You know," he laughed uncomfortably, "the first man."

"The first man to what?"

"Just the first," Adam shrugged. "You know: 'In the Beginning'... yada yada."

Someone on the other side of the circle laughed.

"Easy, Hume," Judith said. "We know the story, Adam. But you weren't *literally* the first. There were others, in the beginning, as you well know."

"But you *have* heard of me," Adam said.

Judith reached into the bottomless box at her feet and produced another set of stones. "You know the rules." She tossed them on the linoleum at Adam's feet. He had five extra sets already—what was a sixth? "Or maybe you don't," she laughed. "This is Adam, everyone," she said to the circle, "the man who named the animals. Hold the applause, please. No autographs until we're through."

Adam tried to speak but winced against the added weight of the new stones. "To name is to know," he said, tinged with the slightest remnant of pride.

"But you don't know *yourself*," Judith informed him. "That's why you're here."

"That's why we're *all* here," said David Hume. "Because of him. I still don't believe it."

The metal chairs quaked.

"That will be all. On to the next terrace with you," Judith said with venom.

Reluctantly, Hume stood, his head hung. In a fashion, he strode to the door, the grubbier, more frequented one at the far side of the room. The one that unapologetically said *DOWN*. Hume opened and closed it and was gone. The darkness emanating from the open door, the only blemish in the otherwise white around them, diminished.

The rest of the circle grew grim and quiet. They sat up straighter and returned their attention to Judith, center circle. "We are *not* here because of Adam," Judith said. "We are here, each of us, because of ourselves—just as if we hope to ascend, it will be *through* ourselves."

"But that's not the insinuation," Adam said. "In scripture, I mean. I'm believed to have allowed sin and mortality to enter the world. If that's not so, why hasn't it been addressed?" he asked no one in particular, his voice climbing.

"Calm down," Judith said. "Yes, okay. You're right. Original Sin doesn't perforate existence; it is simply the first noted sin. Don't think of it as a lie," she said. "But it's a good lie."

"It's a scare tactic." The man crossed himself and looked up. "Saul of Tarsus," he told the group. "As long as we're being honest," his stones clanked as he stood, "the concept of Original Sin was my idea. To explain the Crucifixion. Someone had to make sense out of Christ's death—which

in fact made no sense. In a way, I'm here because of that lie. But, as Judith says, it's a good lie."

"Thanks, Paul." Judith returned her attention to Adam. "Adjacent planes are spiritually perceptible by the living," she told them, "as above, so below... Thus, it is of the utmost importance that all decisions be final. Irregular movements draw attention. His judgment is not fluid; it shouldn't be perceived as such. Now, can we please move on?"

Adam said, "Wait a minute, what?"

Judith sighed.

"Those in the garden don't perceive these planes," Adam said.

Someone cleared their throat, sat up, and said, "Some do." He stood and regarded the circle. "Durante Alighieri," the man said by way of introduction. "You can call me Dante. I'm auditing this circle today."

"Auditing?" someone said incredulously.

"Such is the nature of my Purgatory," Dante informed them. "As I came to better know myself, I came to know God. I caught glimpses of the divine structure at work—'above and below,' as you say. I knew better than to write about it, but I did, anyway. Now, I'm condemned to audit every circle until I get it right." He laughed humorlessly.

"If we could get back on topic," Judith said. "You realize we will get through this if it takes an eternity, don't you?" Returning her attention to Adam she said, "Well, Adam, was it worth it?"

Adam had been asking himself the same question for some time now. When it came down to it, this was the only question. Never mind the ramifications; the question was not whether the risk outweighed the reward. He was thinking about it all wrong. The situation transcended all mankind: be it the first man banished from the Garden, the first man to step foot on the moon, or any man, or any woman, in the infinite regress of people given the opportunity to love another human being as much or more than themselves. "Yes," he said, finally.

"Adam!" Judith shrieked, quickly crossing herself.

On the other side of the room, the *UP* door opened slightly. Not taking his eyes from the dancing light on the other side of it, Adam said, "I might have never known my own limits. But now I do. Am I sorry? Yes. Would I do it again? Well, if my example of what not to do helps someone else choose to do the right thing—then yes. It was worth it. Like you said, it isn't about me."

Judith stood, retrieved her bottomless box, and approached Adam. She sat it at his feet and removed the six sets of stones from around his neck. "You may go, Adam."

In disbelief, he stood and made his way to the door of brilliant white light. It opened the rest of the way as he approached, temporarily blinding him and dazzling the rest of the circle. The door promptly closed behind him.

Judith tossed the stones in the box, returned to her seat, and said, "That's what we call progress, people."

And they moved on to the next penitent.

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DARKNESS OF THE NIGHT

BY JULIA LAFOND



The water sluiced past, singing without words to the rhythm of my rowing. The current's melody rang out in clear tones, punctuated by the droplets that fell from the oar's blade like my own tears. This river, dark gray beneath the clouds that blocked out the moon and stars, understood my sadness in a way no human had.

No pier waited for me on the other side: only the looming shadows of the forest, and the night breeze that rustled the leaves as it passed through them. There shouldn't have been leaves, only bare branches moaning in the wind. There shouldn't have been grass, moss, or flowers, either. When Justin died, the whole world ought to have gone into mourning. Yet, in defiance of the night's gloom, the woods clung to spring's joyous finery.

When I lost my fiancée—no, my husband, if only for a few hours—I lost my entire world. But the outside world barely noticed his absence. After the passing of a mere two months, even his parents urged me to move on.

I moored my boat to a sycamore with peeling white-and-gray bark. Leaning against the trunk, I pulled my rings tighter on my finger. I would not play the part of the widow, with clinking gold and diamond weighing down the chain around my neck.

Not when there remained a chance to bring him back.

Stumbling through the shadows, I fell again and again. Each time, the temptation to resort to my phone's flashlight grew. I gripped my case tighter, resisting the urge. This would only work in the darkness of the night.

Without warning, the cave mouth loomed over me, threatening to engulf me in inky midnight. My mind buzzed with every nightmare I'd ever had, and every gruesome tale I'd ever heard. The hair on the back of my neck stood up, and I glanced over my shoulder, half-convinced a monster prowled behind me. Only the quiet forest lay behind me.

Heart racing, I turned back and plunged into the earth's maw. No monster or nightmare could ever compare to what I had already suffered. Closing my eyes, I pictured Justin: his warm sienna skin, his glossy black hair, and his brown eyes that sparkled with every dimpled smile. For him, I could do anything. And I would.

The darkness was unwavering; the stony floor sloped forever down. There was no way to know how far I had walked, nor what depths lay ahead. Yet somehow, I knew when I had arrived where I was supposed to be. I stopped and sat, gripping my case even tighter.

"Darcy Blake." The voice rumbled through the ground beneath me. "Why have you come to this place?"

It was as if my entire body turned to ice. I could not move, let alone speak. All thoughts slipped from my mind, replaced by the swirling shadows that enveloped me.

"Have you nothing to say?" he said, breaking the silence. "If not, you should leave this place at once."

Never. My bones ached with a cold fury at the thought of such cowardice. Though my tongue remained paralyzed, my hands did not. I opened the case and withdrew my violin. The scent of resin, and the familiar feel of rosewood on my hands, steadied me.

Memories of Justin filled my mind. I drew the bow across the strings, conjuring each one in sequence. The stone walls echoed with joy as I remembered our awkward first meeting, our bashful courtship, and at long last, our engagement. Undertones of foreboding crept in toward the wedding. So many things had gone wrong, from the moldy flowers to the loss of our venue, that even the priest had joked the two of us must be cursed. After we exchanged our vows, it slipped away. The moment our lips met stretched on in pure, endless joy.

I paused, allowing the note to reverberate through the cavern and emphasize the weight of what could have, and should have, come after.

The rest poured out of me in a frenzy, Justin, ducking out of the reception for a stroll with his brothers. My growing fear when they returned without him, realizing his absence too late. The chaos and discord of our disorganized search party. The pain of the thorns and brambles that tore at my dress until it was stained brown with soil and red with my blood. The searing agony of finding my collapsed husband, giving way to determined hope as we rushed him to the hospital. Finally, the soft-spoken doctor whose words plunged me into the abyss of despair, in which I still drowned.

Silent tears flowed down my cheeks. I waited for the echoes to die before returning my instrument to its case, laying it down with the same care with which we had lowered my husband into the grave.

It was a long time before the voice spoke again. "I will grant your request."

My heart pounded giddily as I leapt to my feet. "Thank you! Thank you so—"

"Do not thank me yet," he interrupted sternly. "There is a price to pay."

I nodded, steeling myself for whatever it might be. No matter how painful or difficult it was, I would pay it in full.

"Speak the name of your beloved," he commanded.

At that I hesitated, knowing all too well that names held power. But what power could I give him that he did not already hold?

"Justin Yi," I whispered through my tears.

"Justin Yi shall be returned to you," he replied, "when the moon is dark, in two months' time. Until then, you must speak his name no more."

Surely it could not be something so small and simple. But the voice said nothing else. "I won't," I assured him, picking up my case with trembling hands.

"So say all who come to me," the voice replied, growing softer: "Most, I meet again all too soon."

I hurried away, my case clutched tight to my chest. The more I thought, the lower my heart sank. How could I go two weeks without saying my husband's name? Everyone would notice I was avoiding it and assume excessive grief was at the root of it. They would push and prod me to say his name, as they had pushed me to take off my rings, go through his belongings, and stop visiting his tombstone.


Or would they notice, after all? They barely seemed to have taken heed of his passing. Why would they question it when I joined them in forgetfulness?

Seeming forgetfulness. I tightened my rings once more, overcome with horror at the thought of letting his memory fade into eternal silence.

At the mouth of the cave, I exhaled slowly. For truly, I would be my own greatest enemy. Every shared memory brought his name to my lips. One moment of carelessness, and I would doom us to be forever apart.

Never. I strode back to my boat, jaw clamped tight. Even if I had to cut out my tongue and forsake speech altogether, I would not utter his name until I saw him once more by my side.

As I rowed back, the clouds parted, painting the river silver with reflected moonlight. The water still sang to me. I could not tell whether it was a melody of sadness or hope.



Julia LaFond is a geoscience/astrobiology PhD candidate at Penn State, where she regularly attended the Creative Writing Club pre-pandemic. She's also a member of #TeamVelvetSteel (a group of YA writers who found each other through Pitch Wars). Her repertoire includes "Reflection" (206 Word Stories, Bag of Bones Press), "The Dullahan" (Short Edition/PSU library system), and "The Hunting of the Spider" (Short Edition/PSU library system). In her spare time she enjoys reading, gaming, and advocating for disability rights.

After

By Perdita Stott

Karl had an obsessive need for quiet.

Mary felt her eyes lingering on his face, cold now after years of silence. It had been a handsome face. Once upon a time, the strong chin and high cheekbones had seemed chiselled, manly. Now everything about him was a hard edge, jutting and serious.

"It's going to rain," she offers up a useless observation as a means of breaking the stifling silence at the breakfast table.

He nods once in acknowledgement before turning his attention back to the gray sea beyond the window. He'd removed the clocks. The incessant ticking was intrusive, he'd said.

"To what?" Mary couldn't help thinking.

The house was devoid of anything to intrude upon—except more silence. It felt even more dead without the steady singing of the clocks, a heartbeat suddenly cut off.

Karl had never liked unnecessary noise, even before the children had left, preferring instead to smother himself in the quiet of his own thoughts. Mary did not like being smothered, and she disliked the way he described the children as having left, like it was a choice.

She carefully places her spoon back into her now empty breakfast bowl and secretly delights in the sudden shrill song of metal against china. Karl looks up with a frown but doesn't comment. He would probably have replaced all of the cutlery with paper substitutes if he could.

Karl couldn't understand Mary's sudden need for childishness and chaos. After the children left, it was as if she felt the need to fill the gap with something of her own, unnecessary noises, words. Mary loved to chit chat. It made Karl's skin crawl. She had positively pouted when he got rid of the clocks. They should have been disposed of long ago, but he had allowed them to stay until their usefulness ran out. No need to keep track of time anymore. He stared unseeing out of the window. It was always the same view, the same overhanging cloud forever threatening rain but never falling, the sea a restless animal, growling, biting outside their window.

Mary hopes that today the weather will change. It hasn't done so yet, but she enjoys the sensation of hoping, like drinking soda too fast, the fizz slowly rising in her and lifting her up. Mary also hopes that today the children will come home, but she knows that they won't. Anyway, seeing them here would be wrong, here in the home that is not really home. This new place was not what Mary had been expecting, but then again, she had never really given it much thought, preferring instead to dwell on the present, on the now, instead of the future, the unknown end.

Karl was not a religious man and had never expected a gate, pearly or otherwise. What he had not been expecting, however, was the door. His own front door, muted in colour and slightly out of focus, like a painting held under water. It was all the more disturbing for being a familiar object in an unfamiliar place.

The rest of the house had been the same, still with the slightly faded gray tones. The clocks were still there, in a place that presumably no longer kept time. Why should he have to suffer the steady reminder tick of seconds that could no longer be his? It had not taken long to smash them all. It had been exceptionally satisfying. Orgasmic almost. The sea had been a nice touch, though. They never had a sea view in the old place, just other people's houses spying out from behind net curtains. Now the gray body of the sea surrounds them on all sides.

Mary had always wanted a sea view. Admittedly in her imagination, the sun had been shining and the sea itself had been an endless field of calm blue instead of the cold gray monster that chewed hungrily at the edge of their garden. Mary worried at first that the tide would come in and devour the entire house, but after a few days they came to realize that the sea in their Heaven was unchanging. She still thought in terms of days. Although there was no change between night and day here and no need to sleep. She feels certain that time is passing though, if not here, then at least somewhere, and

so still she stubbornly refers to things as "yesterday," "this morning," and, although less and less frequently, "tomorrow." Mary also refers to the new place as Heaven but can't be certain.

Karl, wrapped in his blanket of silence, does not feel the need to refer to it as anything, even inside his own head. They were here now and that, if he ever felt the need to consider it, was that. Where they were exactly or for how long were details he did not feel the need to trouble himself with. He had the sea and he had his silence and that was all he needed. The thought of the children had bothered Karl but only for the briefest of moments. They were, after all, adults now and quite capable of being left alone, which is why he had left it as long as he had, picking a time which would be most convenient for all involved. He knew that Mary would be upset in a loyal sort of way but that couldn't be helped. When she arrived at the gray house not long after himself, he had given only the faintest of internal shrugs. She was allowed to make her own decisions and it hardly mattered anymore. Not here. He went back to watching the sea.

Mary worried about the mess. She did not like the thought of other people having to clear up after her and wished she had had the presence of mind to lay down some newspaper first. She also worried about the children. She knew that they were grown up and had lives of their own, but she worried about how it would be for them now, after. A dull ache in the back of her head, a constant gnawing which came to the surface in the hot heat of panic whenever she thought about them, although—and she felt a sharp stab of guilt—probably not as much as she should. She felt she should be suffering more, for what she had done, for what she had left behind. She wanted to feel the consequences of her actions, and yet, try as she might, she simply couldn't, as if her body and mind had forgotten how to feel. Apart from the external worry of what had been, there was really nothing to worry about here. It was peaceful, almost boring, but not so much as to make her uncomfortable.

Mary sends a smile across the table at Karl, looks at his face and his eyes, so much like the sea he watches, and uses her voice to slice through the silence.

"I think I shall make soup this afternoon."

Karl responds with one nod and turns his face back to the window.

Mary bustles off to the pantry, which is always full, and starts to chop onions. She smiles internally at the gentle sigh of the falling knife through the white, waxy skin of the onions and listens to the sound of silence slowly breaking around her, falling with a forbidden tinkling noise to the ground. She got into the habit of shuffling her feet, barely lifting them off the ground and placing them back down in rough sliding sighs. The floor is littered with stolen sounds, smashed out of the air by her own voice or the touch she can create against everyday objects. Karl doesn't know, he can't see them; the stolen noises greedily snatched out of thin air then carelessly discarded on the floor. Mary sees them all around her, constant reminders of her private rebellion, colored shards of sound gathered round her feet like hungry pigeons. Every smuggled whisper or stifled cough is a hard-earned victory against the never-ending silence. Karl thinks he's won, but Mary cherishes her unseen triumphs, moves her feet through them every day, and feels their echoes through her fingertips.

Karl can feel one of his headaches coming on. He pinches the bridge of his nose and exhales through his mouth. If he thought about it, he might ask himself why there were headaches in Heaven. But he doesn't think about it, not ever. In fact, he concentrates very hard on not thinking about it. He might not have been expecting anything but he knew that he had been hoping for something. It had been a long time since Karl had tried hoping for anything, and he was a little out of practice, but what he hoped—what he wanted—was a little peace. A blackout, an endless sleep, a point of being that was suspended somewhere between dreaming and wakefulness that he didn't have to engage with at all. Simply to be pulled along by a neverending stream of nothingness, feeling nothing, missing nothing, knowing nothing. If he had to choose, he would not have chosen the gray house. The best he could do was to make silence his friend, wrap himself up in it, feel its weight on him like a duvet, hot and feather-filled with unsaid words. But even the things unsaid left an echo.

Sometimes, Mary thinks she can even taste the words, the sounds that were unmade. They wanted to be made, to be brought to life and they hovered there in mid-creation. They left a slightly smoky taste in the air. Mary licks her lips—a definite aftertaste. Why has she never noticed it before, in the real home? She misses it sometimes but only when she thinks about it. Mary tries hard not to think about it. This is what she has now and she will enjoy it as best she can. She tried going outside

a couple of times but something about the air didn't seem right. Not bad exactly, a little heavy maybe but not threatening. Not exactly. It was the suspension, the feeling of something almost happening, she thought. When she went outside she felt the whole world hold its breath, invisible eyes followed her every movement, waiting for her to do something. She didn't know what this something was, what was expected of her; worried in case she did the wrong thing and so, scared, she ran back inside, back into the silence and the taste of unsaid words.

Karl watches Mary walk back in, two steaming bowls of soup in hand. She places his in front of him and he gives a curt nod of thanks, taking care not to dip his head too far forward for fear of spilling his headache over into his lap. It swam around somewhere behind his eyes and made it difficult to focus. He should lie down after lunch. He wasn't really hungry. He was never hungry here, but Mary insisted on making three meals a day anyway; cups of tea, biscuits to be nibbled on. Old habits. It was so almost what life used to be like, so almost normal. It is a house of almost, a home of nearlies, spread out before them, the sense of something about to begin but held back. Karl has had enough of almost.

He raises the spoon to his lips and blows gently on the steaming soup.

"Is it nice?" Mary asks even before he's had a chance to taste it.

"I haven't even had a chance to taste it," he says evenly.

"Well, go on." She is eager; practically manic, like a small dog locked up for too long. She can almost feel her tail wagging, imagining the sweeping noise it would make against the carpet. The thump as it hits her sides. She smiles.

Karl puts the spoon in his mouth, still too hot, unable to taste anything. "Very good," he says.

Mary smiles at him. They both knew he would say that. Like actors in a play, they are saying their correct lines.

Out over the horizon the sky is changing, the clouds curling in on themselves, bulging and expanding. The sea begins to roll a little faster; waves break a little harder. The gray becomes a bruise, a slap in the sky, a black eye. Mary looks out of the window across the changing sea and tucks a strand of hair behind her ear, listening to the scrape of skin-on-skin slice through the silence, and watches as the broken sounds fall into her lap. She glances over at Karl.

"Oh, look," she says, "the weather's starting to turn at last."

They both look out of the window at the changing skies and watch as the rain begins to fall.



I am a writer mainly for the stage and for comedy. After having my daughter two years ago I moved from London to the Southwest where I now live on Dartmoor. I spend my time writing, hiking, and preventing my toddler from putting small and dangerous objects into her mouth. I am working on expanding my writing portfolio, exploring different forms of prose, and drinking too much tea.

Land's End

By Kate Hunneyball

I saw the job listing taped to a lamppost at Land's End. It seemed like a strange place for an ad but I figured they must be trying to catch people at their lowest, right before they jumped off the cliffs. And I was definitely at my lowest. After four months of unemployment, I was about ready to apply for a job in telesales. So, when I saw the flyer that read "Human Sacrifice urgently needed. £12 an hour", I couldn't believe my luck. £12 is way above minimum wage.

I wasn't a jumper though. At least, I wasn't when I arrived at Land's End. I'd spent the last of my savings on a trip down to Cornwall. It wasn't a holiday—when you're unemployed you don't get holidays—I just had to get away from London. The frantic violence of the city was making me sick. It's the plastic in the water, the diesel in the air—they seep into your brain like a thick noxious sludge. The sprawling grey slabs grow inside you. They make you frantic and violent too. I needed them cut out of me.

That's why I went to Cornwall. It's isolated and wild, and the only part of England the Angles never got to. I wanted to be with my island's native Celts. I thought they might be able to cure me.

Land's End was my first stop. I'd always wanted to see the most westerly point in England. The weather that day was perfect: cloudy and drizzly. I pictured myself standing atop the cliffs, wreathed in mist, at the edge of the world—the last romantic offering of an undead age. But when I arrived, I realised that this wouldn't be possible, because the bastards have built a hotel there instead.

Not just a hotel, a whole fucking theme park. I couldn't believe how they'd reduced the cliffs to a wasteland of tarmac, complete with a small town of gift shops, hot dog stands, and, inexplicably, a 4D interactive *Star Wars* adventure. I decided to stick with three dimensions and went straight for the cliffs. All I wanted was to feel an unpolluted sea breeze on my face. Of course, you had to wait in line for that too.

The horde of tourists queueing to pay £5 for their special Land's End selfie made my stomach turn. Then, to make matters worse, a puffin started talking to me.

"Caw! Hiya, mister. I'm Perry the Land's End puffin! What's your name?" he asked.

"Uh, Ted," I answered.

"Hiya, Ted. The midday laser show is starting in ten minutes!" he said. "It's going to be eggcellent!"

I felt bad for the poor guy, stuck in a bird costume every day, getting paid minimum wage. Not bad enough to go to a laser show though.

"No thanks," I said.

"Want a picture with me, Perry the Puffin?" He went on. "Printouts included for £10."

"Do puffins even live here?" I snapped.

He cocked his head. Through the plastic mask, pained eyes stared at me.

"Caw! I'm Perry, the Land's End puffin," he repeated. "It's been a pl-egg-sure meeting you!"

I walked back to the car without having seen the end of the land. It didn't matter. I had seen man's end and that was enough. So, when I spotted the ad, it was a light in the darkness. Perhaps my body could be payment for our sins.

'Of course, I had my doubts. Sure, the job gets a lot of negative press, but think about it: you only ever hear from the bad human sacrifices.

The ad also specified that the ritual involved "unimaginable pain," but so do most conversations with my parents about "what I'm doing with my life." At least now I could say I was doing something with my death. And besides, I've always had this lingering suspicion

that I probably deserve unimaginable pain. I'm not a bad guy, but I am quite pathetic. Maybe if I had experienced some unimaginable pain earlier in life, I wouldn't have this overwhelming sense of self-loathing and shame. Or, at least, I might have slightly less.

Anyway, I sent off my CV that evening and they replied the very next day!

Apparently, they needed to fill the role in time for Samhain. I was a bit annoyed when they said I'd have to do a group interview, but then I remembered they were looking to see who could endure the most pain and suffering. That must be why they held it over Zoom.

It was me and one other guy on the call. The interviewer was a friendly woman named Linda, a typical HR type: glasses, blonde bun, the works. The other guy was useless, but I had all the right answers. I said my favourite film was *The Wickerman*, that my hero was Bern Brandes (that German who volunteered to be cannibalised), and I even talked about my love of *Doctor Who*, just in case they were looking for a virgin.

An hour later, I'd got the job! That was on the 30th, so I only had half a day to say goodbye to my life. I was done by dinnertime.

The ritual wasn't until sundown, but I had to check out of the hotel at eleven. After that, I sort of drove around aimlessly. I felt like I should probably be making the most of the last hours of my life—eating good food, savouring the sunshine on my face, sleeping with a beautiful person, but I've never been good at those sorts of things. They make me feel guilty. I did try Tinder, but that just made me glad I was about to die. In the end, I just sat in my car eating a multi-pack of cheese and onion crisps.

The address I'd been given was located further inland, in the Cornish hills. A thick fog set in as the day wore on, quickly consuming the narrow road ahead. I found myself driving extra slowly around the sharp corners, as if I was delivering a priceless parcel. My body finally had value; I couldn't depreciate it now.

As I drove, my muscles tensed and twitched. The thought of being damaged made my skin tingle. Since they'd offered me the job, I'd found myself more aware than ever of how wrong this all felt. Being in this body, this mind, this place. And now I had an alternative, I could feel it, like a caustic poison in my chest, coursing through my veins, burning my skin. The impotence. The sickness. The rage. I dug my fingernails into the steering wheel until they broke through the rubber. This ritual couldn't begin soon enough. Being was becoming unbearable.

The sat nav took me onto a road atop the hills. By now the light was turning dim and grey. The sky was overcast. Atop the hills, it felt like I was inches from the sky. Finally, I spotted a small stone sign that read: "Fairy Glen, 100 yards."

'As per their instructions, I followed a path out of a layby and clambered over a gate. It brought me to a meadow enclosed by a tall hedge. The grass was thick and sprinkled with daisies. Empty fields, devoid of life, rose and fell over the neighbouring hills. The air was still and silent. At the top of the meadow, figures stood in the mist. I could tell they were waiting for me.

I gave a friendly wave, but they didn't wave back. My mouth went dry. As I got closer, I could see that they wore ragged animal furs. Their faces were strange and twisted, with horns and feathers protruding at odd angles. The figures were arranged in a circle, in between weathered standing stones. They stood as still and as silent as the stones themselves. I passed into the centre of the circle and realised their faces were hidden by grotesque masks. Only their eyes were showing. A woman wielding a large wooden staff approached me.

"Hi Ted, nice to finally meet you in person," she said.

"Oh, hi Linda." I tried to hide my shallow breathing, in case they started to doubt my commitment to the role. Mentally, I was still totally down for dying, but my body was having second thoughts.

"Put this on," she said, pulling a tattered fur loincloth from a Tesco bag-for-life. I couldn't help but notice that there was also a fur bikini top still at the bottom of the bag.

"Uh, do you want me to wear that as well?"

She shrugged. "That's up to you."

"Well, it is pretty cold..." I paused, but quickly went off the idea. I figured I should probably die with a little bit of dignity. "Where should I get changed?"

"Right here," Linda answered.

"Oh, right."

I undressed with a frown. Apparently, my dignity was too much to ask for. But I told myself that it was my first day on the job, and I had to be a team player.

When I'd changed, the other figures drew pointed instruments and closed in on me. I thought they might be knives and imagined the ecstasy of a dozen blades carving beautiful patterns 'out of my

pallid, unclean skin. But when one was pressed into my chest, I realised that they were paintbrushes and tattoo needles.

Strong hands held me in place as busy fingers went to work on my body, preparing me. The needles daubed what looked like feathers into my skin, while brushes marked long lines, like a surgeon might on his next patient. Meanwhile, ropes were thrown around my wrists and ankles. They strapped me to a hard wooden board and pulled me taut. I was pinned to the board like a bug on a display, my soft underbelly exposed and defenceless. Pinned so tight I couldn't squirm.

The sunlight was fading, so they lit torches. The meadow was now bathed in flickering red light. Once the preparations were done, the masked people moved back to their positions in the circle and started to hum. Against my will, my body reacted. It broke out in a sweat. My breathing turned ragged. Their humming turned to chanting as someone entered at the edge of the meadow.

Standing there, in the mist and the moonlight, was a large man wearing a crown of jagged antlers. He walked forward, dragging a large, curved knife through the grass. Shivers ran down my back. Suddenly, the night seemed very cold.

The chanting continued until he reached the centre of the stone circle. Then he raised his arms high. The knife caught the moonlight. All fell silent.

"Brothers and sisters of the endless flight!" the man boomed in a gruff, raspy voice. "At last on the eve of vengeful spirits and—" he glanced towards me, "in the light of... of... of a blood-wait." He dropped his arms and turned to Linda. "I thought we'd said we were getting a woman?"

"We tried, your grace," she replied. "But he was all we could find on such short notice."

He frowned. "It's just, I was really expecting a young, beautiful woman."

"If you want, you can cut my dick off?" I chimed in.

"No, no, it's fine," the king sighed. "We'll make do."

He wasn't keen on the idea, but at least I'd shown initiative in his eyes. Employers love that.

"Anyway, as I was saying. On the eve of vengeful spirits and the light of the blood moon, we, the children of the clouds, will cleanse ourselves of these earthly bodies," he said. At least, he said something like that. I kind of tuned out after a while.

Eventually, he finished his speech and Linda started rattling her wooden staff. The circle moved in with their torches. The king approached me, brandishing his long knife. The hairs on my skin stood up.

"Son of man," he boomed. "You come to us unclean. You come to us imprisoned. You volunteer yourself for torment so that we might rise?"

I looked at Linda. "Well, no, I'm getting paid, right? I'm not a volunteer."

"Just say yes," he growled.

"Sure. Yeah."

He lifted the knife to my face. The chanting quickened. It was all around me and inside me, like a choir in my skull. I wanted to look the king in his face. I wanted to be the bravest human sacrifice he'd ever hired. But I couldn't help clenching my eyes shut and crying out as he cut into my skin. Warm blood trickled down my forehead, stinging my eyes.

"Bring the mask."

Through the bluriness and the blood, I saw hands moving something towards my face. It couldn't be a mask—the inside was lined with needles, like the jaws of an iron maiden. The king aligned the eye holes with my own. But there was no mouth hole, just a large, square wooden block.

"Wait, what're you—" I stammered. "Just wait!"

But they weren't listening. They kept chanting, pushing the needles closer. First, they pricked my forehead.

"No, no, no—"

I cried out as they pushed the needles into my skin, through flesh, hitting bone. The wooden block slipped into my open mouth. It tore the sides. I gagged and choked. It stretched my cheek muscles into the needles, burying them deeper in my face, but I couldn't scream. I threw my head back. The mask shook a little. I might still get free. But the king steadied it with a large hand, placed over the eye holes and pressed with all his might. Something cracked. I blacked out.

When I woke up, I was here. Back where I started. But I can still feel the needles in my face. Piercing my mouth. I can't speak. And they lied. I'm still alive. I'm still sick. They didn't cure me. They

flew away.

I saw them! I saw a flock of birds flying out to sea. I know that was them. Free at last! They trapped me here so they could escape. I can't escape. I tried to throw myself off the cliff, but I couldn't do it. They won't let me!

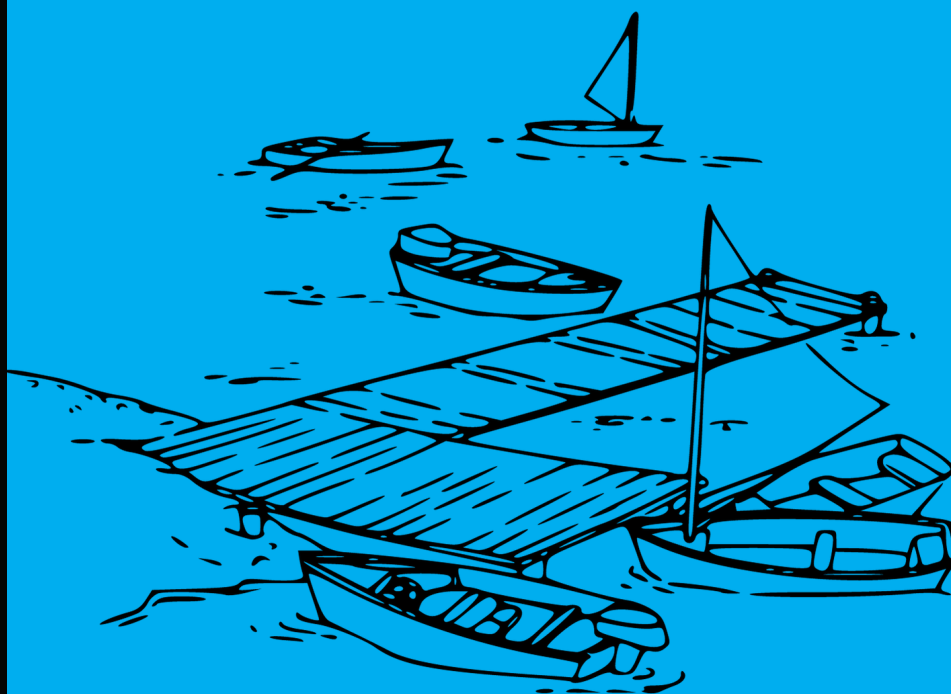
They made me like this. It's not a costume. I can't take it off. It's my skin. I know it sounds crazy but you've got to help me. Get someone. Cut me out of this. Or kill me. I don't care, just let me go. Please—'

The American tourist interrupts me.

'I told you, I don't care about the laser show. I just want to know where the toilets are.'

"Caw! The toilets are in block C. Be egg-s-tra sure to wash your feathers! Caw!"

The tourist shakes his head and walks away. Within the puffin mask, I use my eyes to scream.



Kate Hunneyball is a 23-year-old English writer, born and raised in Norwich. She completed a BA in English Literature at the University of Leeds in 2019, specializing in trauma and narrative theory, and is currently studying MA Screenwriting at the University of Arts London. Kate's depressing, vaguely boring, and occasionally funny writing has been featured in Fuzzy Mag and Pure Slush.



Nonfiction

An Invisible Wake

By Julie Wittes Schlack

A mobile in motion leaves an invisible wake behind it, or rather, each element leaves an individual wake behind its individual self ... a slow, gentle impulse.

--Alexander Calder, 1973

Feet and knees aching like an old woman's, I'm seated in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts exhibit titled "Hyman Bloom: Matters of Life and Death." It's my first visit since my mother died.

I'd come to see the photographs in the Howard Greenberg Collection, a stunning collection of 447 photos that chronicle American and European lives during the mid-20th Century.

In my early teens, it was Walker Evans' work that awoke me to the power of black and white photography. This collection has surprisingly few Evans prints, but I lingered in front of one I'd never seen before: *Negroes' Church, South Carolina, 1936*. It's a typical Evans photo – unpeopled and austere – but today it strikes me as something almost threatening. Immediately below the roof over the entrance, two dark, shadowed windows look like the cut-out eye holes in a Klansman's hood, the vertically paneled door the mouth.

Why am I now seeing menace where I once saw pride and light? After all, I don't yet know that the COVID-19 pandemic will strike in six weeks, that this will be my last outing to the museum for the foreseeable future.

I brought my mother here frequently in the last few years of her life. Though her legs worked well enough, chronic light-headedness from Parkinson's Disease had made it impossible for her to stand or walk for more than a couple of minutes at a time. But sitting, gazing, waiting for the oblivious viewers in front of her to step away and finally give her an unimpeded view of the canvas – she could be transported, not just pushed from place to place.

Since returning to art-making in her retirement, forty years after taking her first painting class, my mother's own work was wildly variable. You couldn't look at anyone painting or collage or small sculpture and recognize it as distinctively hers. She had no Blue Period or Spanish Series or set of Mountain Montages. Other than her frequent use of text – found or painted, single words or scraps of small, dense classified ads, instruction manuals, canned food labels, Chinese funeral paper, or brochures for travel or cosmetics or political candidates – her art had no defining characteristic, at least not to my uneducated eyes. You could only say that it – that she – was restless. And though physically cautious, in her art she was utterly fearless.

For a long time, I confused her lack of fear with lack of discipline. She'd had a comfortable, even pampered youth and – always hungry for new experiences – readily indulged her impulses.

I was about to write that she had expensive taste, but that's wrong. She had a distinctive taste. Her physical environment mattered enormously to her; any place with streaming natural light where she could knock down walls and repaint the ones that were left would qualify as a structure she'd like to call home. That didn't necessarily mean spending a lot of money – my parents never had a new car, and I don't think my mother ever purchased a new piece of furniture until she was in her late 70s – but it often did, simply because she craved change.

Which perhaps is why the art she loved on those museum outings was so eclectic.

"When you extend yourself, you can't possibly know what you're doing." She is reading a quote from an interview with Alex Katz. "That's been my experience," she says cheerily.

We are studying Katz's huge, bold painting of his wife Ada. Pink lipstick, beige skin, a hint of shadow under the chin, and an enormous, floppy black hat against a yellow background – the portrait is simple and bold and flat and, to my eyes, utterly decorative; a piece of hotel art but with brighter colors. But my mother's seeing something else in it, something more. She's seeing Ada's confidence, her ease with posing, and Katz's comfort with color manifested in that canvas. She will subsequently treat herself to a large, vinyl purse bearing that image in the gift shop.

For the four remaining years of her life, everyone she meets will comment on the splendor of that handbag.

Our last trip to the MFA together was in August, seven months before she died. My brother and nieces were visiting from out of town, conscious that the opportunities for time together were likely dwindling. My mother was by now chronically fatigued and in pain, washed out like a faded image, lacking in the contrasts that had so defined her.

We were at the museum to see a Mark Rothko exhibit. I was drawn to the multiform works, huge striped canvases in which each bar of color melts into the next. My mother asked to be parked in front of the two black canvases, each gleaming in a way that seemed to repel my gaze. But she took their impermeability as a challenge, determined to see how the darkness was made.

As we were getting ready to leave, my niece asked her what she thought of the exhibit.

"I wish I'd had his patience," she told us. "That was never my strong suit." She was, by now, after two years of diminishing capacity and increasing pain, impatient for death.

Suddenly a siren sounded. A loudspeaker voice instructed everyone to evacuate the building. We hustled to the elevator; the squeak of her chair's rubber wheels against the polished floor now audible in the empty building, but the elevator had been automatically disabled. The only way out was via the stairs.

We made our way to a beautiful staircase – long and skylight-lit, with shallow risers and marble steps. My niece – who loved my mother and loved Rothko with quiet tenacity – helped her grandmother rise from her wheelchair, folded it, and carried it down the stairs. Then, with my husband at my mother's side and me facing her one stair below, she grabbed the gleaming chrome handrail firmly in arthritic hands and began to sidestep her way down. We moved to a rhythm that was slow but staccato; as her right foot touched each new stair, mine would do the same. Like a Lady-in-Waiting, I held up the hem of her dress so that she wouldn't trip on it. Every few steps, we'd stop for a moment to let her rest.

Sirens wailed and now we could hear the fire engines rumbling into the parking lot. With agonizing deliberation, we made our way down the thirty or so steps, and when my niece snapped open the wheelchair to embrace her as she finally arrived at the first floor, my mother did not sink into it. Rather, she slowly, regally lowered herself, as if this mode of transport was suddenly a choice rather than a necessity.

Then she reached over her shoulder to cover my niece's hand, which rested on the back of the wheelchair. She looked longingly at the vacant first-floor gallery as she was pushed out the door.

"Great job, Grammy," my niece said.

"Not bad for an old lady," she acknowledged.

But I was still thinking about her on our way down the steps. *Are you okay?* I'd asked. She'd nodded yes, her jaw loosening and her deep brown eyes brightening as the choreography became more practiced. I'd silently berated myself for asking since her answer didn't matter, since we had no choice but to do what we were doing, to cocoon her descent.

The first time I stood in my high school's darkroom with my classmates was to develop a roll of 35 mm film. The deep red safety light illuminated only enough to reveal the silhouettes of our bodies. After days of practicing how to pry off the lid of the film canister with a can opener, thread the unspooling film onto a reel, and place the reel into the development tank, we were finally doing it for real. The darkness, the intense focus on my own fingertips and the concentration that the task required, the silence except for the breathing of the other kids and occasional quietly muttered curse – it all felt vaguely sexy.

My anticipation only heightened when we emerged into the fluorescent light of the classroom to pour the developer we'd premixed into our tanks. After ten minutes, we poured it out, rinsed the still-encased film for a couple of minutes, then poured in the liquid that would "fix" the image, preventing the film from darkening any further where it had been exposed to light. unscrewed the lids of our tanks, lifted out the reel, and gently pulled off the vinegary-smelling negatives, sticky to the touch.

I was bowled over. There was a strip of tiny, chromatically reversed images, just like the kind I'd gotten in envelopes from the drugstore. *I'd* done this – seemingly made something out of nothing.

But the wonder of developing film paled next to the magic of making a print. I'd shot a roll of moody images – spiky tree branches reaching out against a darkening sky, a crow standing sentry on

the peak of a roof, a white-maned man with a flaring white beard who I'd surreptitiously shot as he sat on a park bench berating an invisible companion, numerous brooding sunsets, and a photo or two of my older brother, one foot resting on a tree stump, goateed and somber.

The first one I printed was the tree, sensing that its contrast with the sky would be vivid and gripping. It was, but the theatricality of the image was surpassed by the drama of its emergence. The creases of clouds, the thorny twigs at the branches' tips – these were signs of a latent world released from the paper, inanimate but somehow alive. And that miracle was repeated with every print I made that day – a different image surfacing from the inscrutable white surface of the 5" x 7" sheet as if that image and only that image had been there all along.

I did a lot with that first set of negatives. I played with double-exposures, superimposing the bearded, messianic face of the homeless man against the brooding sky to present the face of a dazed and angry God. Layering one set of tree branches on top of another in the enlarger, I created dense thickets out of what had been individual trees.

My pictures were corny and melodramatic; the clumsy card tricks of a child magician. But I was an adolescent and the process of making them instantiated all that I was feeling each day. It forced me to imagine what could be conjured, to quite literally see possibilities.

And that anticipatory seeing informed what I did behind the camera lens. I learned to recognize when and where a great shot might compose itself. In the Guggenheim Museum, I stood at the banister of the winding ramp, finger on the shutter, knowing it was just a matter of time before some person would peer into the glass case housing a metal face, jutting and angular, presenting the same profile as the sculpture they were studying. I found the spot in the public bathroom where I could capture the faces of women studying their reflections in the mirror without being in the shot myself. On a ferry boat in Greece, I saw the lined, kerchiefed old face I wanted to photograph, and hid patiently behind my friend until I could snag it in the frame.

During my first year of college, I got to use the dorm's darkroom only occasionally. And when I did, it was usually just to develop and print the photos I was dutifully and increasingly, resentfully taking for the school newspaper. Pictures of City Council meetings – white men in white nylon shirts that revealed the outlines of their white undershirts – were over-exposed and boring. My photos of actors rehearsing had all the verve of paper doll dioramas. Even the anti-war demonstrations that I attended with and without my camera were wholly lacking in rage or joy.

My assigned images looked like homework. By sophomore year, I'd moved on. Without the sad, frantic wisdom born of aging, I didn't yet know that I needed to nurture what I loved.

I almost left the museum today without looking at Hyman Bloom's work. I've never heard of him and would have skipped the exhibit were it not for the old-world Jewishness of his name, one I associate with a schemata manufacturer or the guy slicing smoked meat at the deli. I picture the artist as a man with bags the size of butt cheeks under his eyes, a smoker's cough, and a sense of humor that careens between crude and sly.

Instead what I see in the black-and-white portrait near the entrance is a man with fine features – a thin nose and penetrating dark eyes peering out over a thick black beard. A cowlick popping up from the middle of his scalp makes him look young and earnest.

The rooms are painted a deep, rich blue and the gallery is almost empty—a respite after the brightness and din of the photography exhibit. But while dim, the walls are not muted, as the colors on so many of these canvases are luminous, as glorious as any I've ever seen. Still, some of these pictures are hard to look at – the ones of corpses and severed limbs that Bloom painted for years after watching autopsies being performed.

In *The Hull*, a pair of knife-wielding hands lifts an intact rib cage from a young body draped backward over an autopsy table. The ribs look like meat, but also like the framework of a ship, still sturdy and robust. In *Torso and Limbs*, body parts are heaped askew-like pieces of laundry. But one leg atop the pile ends in a beautiful ballet foot, its pointed toes commanding our gaze upwards and out at the glowing dawn sky surrounding the stack, all yellows and soft pink, orange, and blue.

I quickly look away from these canvases, finding refuge in the text next to each. Of his experiences in the anatomy lab to witness the dissections he would ultimately paint, Bloom said, "On

the one hand, it was harrowing. On the other hand, it was beautiful – iridescent and pearly. It opened up avenues for feelings not yet gelled; it had a liberating effect ... As a subject, it could synthesize things for me. The paradox of the harrowing and the beautiful could be brought into unity."

These are the words of a true mystic. Raised in an orthodox Jewish family, Bloom was a Latvian immigrant whose spiritualism changed course when he discovered the music of India and the writings of Sri Ramakrishna and Madame Blavatsky. His favorite subjects appeared to be rabbis, chandeliers, corpses, cantors, and fish. In all of them, he saw radiating light. In death and decay, he saw life shining out.

He became a believer in reincarnation, in the absence of endings.

In the days after my mother's surgery for colon cancer, I saw both decay and radiance.

When I was finally able to see her hours after her operation, she was lying in bed, deeply sedated. Her bottom dentures were out, she was devoid of make-up, her thinning white hair was plastered to her scalp, and a nasal-gastric tube pumped bilious green fluid from her stomach into a canister behind her with indifferent efficiency. She would have been repellent to me if she were a stranger. But her lips were moving, and the sounds coming out of her mouth – some of them recognizable words – were musical and sweet.

In the moments before being wheeled to the operating room, she had been chatting with the two young anesthesiologists, asking them about their histories and interests and families, her curiosity about others unabated.

Despite the early hour, her eyes were clear, her blood pressure perfect. She was as relaxed as someone settling in with their popcorn to watch a movie they'd been looking forward to. She still ferociously loved life, she said but believed she'd led a good one and seemed to feel that her death, whenever it came, would not be a tragedy.

That's what I thought then. Now I'm struck by my willful naivete.

In discussing *Hamnet*, her book about the death of Shakespeare's son, Maggie O'Farrell referred to the fear of loss as "love turned inside out, like a glove."

For the last three days of her life, my mother was unconscious, or at least I didn't have any sense of what was going on inside her. But it seemed that the only fear in the room was mine.

I eventually tired of my obsession with the Great Depression photos that were intended to represent more than their subjects and began studying images that were deliberately non-iconic.

I was especially enraptured by the psychological intimacy of Esther Bubley's photography. She managed to make herself invisible. How else could she have captured the pale face of a lone woman at The Sea Grille Bar and Restaurant in a photo that is luminous and longing; it is creamy and human in a room that is all angles and shadow. Melting into the walls of a three-room New York apartment, Bubley frames the startled face of a new mother jolted out of her ironing by the sound of her child's wail. Looking at it, I'm transfixed by the woman's dark eyes, which while staring intently, are looking inward, as if she is straining to hear her own thoughts.

Shadows can be so richly read. Though I view and admire color photographs, they interest me less as time goes on. They feel embellished. Now in my sixties, I find that I want less, not more – less stuff, less stimulation. Black and white pictures are intrinsically sparer. They help me focus my attention, to see what is hidden by the verisimilitude of color. Because they have less visual information, what's there feels more essential.

I thought I saw a flare of iridescent blue in the sky soon after the death of my Uncle Herbie – a man who had been a second father to me. Even in that moment, I knew I was projecting my desire to believe in a soul, in some unique essence that, freed from the body, finds a new form. I was choosing to flirt with an unfounded faith. Soon after, and ever since, I've read books about neuroscience, seeking evidence for what I want to but don't quite believe.

"The illusion is irresistible," wrote neuroscientist Paul Broks in his 2003 essay collection, *Into the Silent Land*. "Behind every face, there is a self. We see the signal of consciousness in a gleaming eye and imagine some ethereal space beneath the vault of the skull, lit by shifting patterns of feeling and

thought, charged with intention. An essence. But what do we find in that space behind the face, when we look? The brute fact is there is nothing but material substance: flesh and blood and bone and brain. I know, I've seen. You look down into an open head, watching the brain pulsate, watching the surgeon tug and probe, and you understand with absolute conviction that there is nothing more to it. There's no one there. It's a kind of liberation."

Was the essence of a person ever there? Broks seemed to be saying no. And now I study Hyman Bloom, who spent his whole life affirming the opposite.

"His paintings of corpses in a state of dismemberment and decay are at once physical records of the molecular process of decay, change, and transformation, and of a spiritual process of substance being transformed into spirit," art historian Henry Adams said of Bloom.

Adams might have been quoting Bloom directly. This young man, brother, and son to leather workers, to people who cut and pummeled and polished the hides — no, not so euphemistic — the skins of once-living animals into purses and belts, understood something about transformation.

In explaining his glorious, iridescent images of eviscerated corpses, he said, "These paintings are emblems of metamorphosis ... I felt there was the possibility of opening a door into what is beyond, to see the mystery beyond the partition ..."

Bloom chose not to believe in death as final. With what strikes me as almost pitiable conviction, he said, "Life is not just what we experience on earth. We don't just die and rot away. That would tell us that life is trivial, and that wouldn't make sense."

In his refusal to believe that a soul could simply end, this visually inventive man suffered from a failure of imagination.

Still, I would have expected my gullible mother, always intrigued by the exotic, to be in Hyman's Bloom's mystical camp had she known about it. Some of her paintings of imaginary creatures had the look of reincarnated souls gathering for a campfire reunion. But in her last hours of consciousness, she rejected my expressed belief that she would see my father again.

"You mean life after death?" she asked, her narcotized voice slurred and puzzled. "Do you mean heaven?"

"No, not heaven," I answered. "But people who have died and been revived describe seeing their loved ones at the moment of death. Their memories, their brain's capacity to envision, make them feel that they are seeing the people they love."

Slowly, regretfully, she shook her head. "That's not for me. I want the real thing."

Though imagination is just as real as fact, it cannot replace it.

A few months after my father's death, my mother told me that she slept with his pajama shirt next to her. But beyond that, I know little. Normally forthcoming, my mother carried her grief then and for the rest of her life with fierce and protective privacy.

But when she returned to painting, she was astonished by the colorful, joyful images that she found herself creating.

"He wanted me to get back to art," she told me, "and he was so proud of my work. I think that's what I'm channeling."

Working in acrylics, monotype, collage, and mixed media, her art during those years was bold. Great big canvases, invented mythical creatures, glitter and rubber, and ink tussling and colliding in golds and greens and crimson. Subtle it was not, but it had the kinesthetic wisdom she'd shown as a younger woman.

Back then, for most of my childhood and young adulthood, her body was her comfortable home, not her prison. She was a tentative skier, a reluctant skater, but that woman could dance. Even when seriously overweight and suffering from arthritic knees, she and my father could waltz and jitterbug with such lightness that they seemed to float over the floor. Even after breaking her pelvis, then losing her balance to Parkinson's Disease, she'd carefully wheel her walker into the shallows of Walden Pond, then let go and plunge into the water, legs kicking, arms stroking, head-turning methodically for breath, determinedly swimming to nowhere.

But in time, even sitting upright made her feel faint, and bursitis in her hips made lying down an ordeal. Torn rotator cuffs in her shoulders made raising and lowering her arms to dress, let alone to

paint, increasingly difficult. And with spiraling sensitivity, she felt the slightest breeze as an assault. Her extraordinary antennae, once so attuned to pleasure, had flipped their poles.

How did she go from pain's conqueror to its victim? Slowly, at first reluctantly, and then, crossing some neurological threshold in her last six months, with adamant surrender.

During the pandemic, I've been taking an online drawing class. Today our teacher told us to select a picture of someone important to us and create a sketched portrait from the photograph.

The photo I chose was taken at a party held for my mother two years after my father died. In it, her head, its newly white hair framing her tan face, is tilted to the right. She is smiling and gesticulating as she speaks, her left hand a blur of manicured nails and turquoise rings.

I'm a terrible artist. The faces I sketch are typically marked by broken noses, gapped teeth, jug ears, grotesque smiles, and terrified eyes. But today I'm meticulous, attentive to the distance between eyebrows and hairline, nostrils and upper lip, erasing and redrawing to get my marks closer to truth.

When I'm done, I prop my sketchpad up on the window and step away from it. What I've produced is a pretty good likeness of my grandmother.

My mother's mother developed Alzheimer's disease in her early 70s. Her descent into dementia wasn't evident from the photos I took of her during her last summer of independence, in which she still appears as the delicate, elegant woman I'd grown up with. Her high, rounded cheekbones presided over a face that hadn't yet sunk, her silver hair was perfectly coiffed, and the milky crescents on her manicured fingernails lent her arthritic hands an exotic beauty.

Before she stopped speaking altogether, my grandmother – seeking help or treats or comfort – called her daughter Mommy.

That definitive role reversal haunted my mother, and the awful prospect of it haunted me. And of course, in the last month of her life, what I feared finally occurred. During an episode of night terrors, she pleaded with her aide Sandra to "Please call my mother."

But by the time she lay in her room at the long-term care hospital – the place where she died eleven days after arriving – she seemed to have forgotten that experience.

Heavily sedated, she woke up long enough to ask me, "Did Daddy die?"

"He did," I answered. "He died nine years ago."

"I miss him," she murmured, then drifted back to sleep, probably before even hearing me respond "I do too."

But later I wondered: was she asking about my father or hers? When she'd asked Sandra to "call my mother," did she mean me or did she mean *her* mother? Was she confused, or was I just making myself the center of her story?

I still take pictures, but those taken on my phone are generally dull and indistinguishable. My fingers are clumsy; pinching and zooming feels like a distraction from the process of seeing, not integral to it the way that manually changing the F-stop and focusing the lens still does.

But even when shot with a camera, the pictures I take now aren't nearly as good as those from my high school years. I've lost both speed and attentiveness. I'm less alert to where and when the great picture is going to present itself, and even when I know, my finger and eyes fail to grab it. It's as if I've lost sight of possibilities or am too slow to catch them.

The problem isn't just age, though. It's that I'm generally shooting in color. Black and white film needs less light than color film, so you can use faster shutter speeds to catch smaller moments, moments where all four of the horse's feet are off the ground and gravity is seemingly defied. You can also shoot in darker places where the stars, stories, and endings aren't evident.

After my father died, it took months before I could retrieve any memories of him outside of the last few weeks of his life. The drive to leave nothing unsaid, the constant tug between needing to care for my parents and for myself and others in my life, my fear of his imminent death and the prospect of liberation from fear – all those forces erected a wall between the consuming present and the decades that had preceded it.

I'm experiencing the same phenomenon with my mother: So until her whole life, her whole self returns to me in memory, I try to make a list of her last good moments.

One is a mid-afternoon in January, in the living room of her Assisted Living facility, where she is giving an illustrated talk titled "My Life in Art."

"It's often the materials that guide me through a piece," she explains when asked where she gets her ideas. "I may start with a concept that is completely open and it grows itself as I paint, collage, layer, elaborate, and strip. I stop when I have a sense that I've created something that is whole, with a life of its own."

I'm once again struck by her fluency, increasingly rare. But more than that, I am delighted to learn what goes on inside her head as she daubs and glues and pauses, tongue sticking out from the corner of her mouth, concentrating with a happy oblivion.

"I started painting landscapes, and never stopped," she says, stepping through a succession of paintings that start as images of choppy lakes, forbidding trees, verdant and undulating meadows, and the red roofs of rural farmhouses. But then we start seeing collages and abstract paintings, the jagged vitality of skylines and graffiti, recognizable objects like babies, tomatoes, phone poles, gleaming fish and upended shopping carts emerging from the visual din. "These are landscapes too," she says happily. "Just more interior ones."

As she gets to her more recent work, the colors tend to be more muted, but also more playful in their interactions. The canvases are less dense, with more open space. "As I developed Parkinson's Disease, I had to start working on smaller surfaces," she explains. "I began compensating for the limitations in my own movement by making images that had a lot of animation. In this collage, you see a lot of forms and shapes, a lot of crisscrossing. Animation, though, is the main thing I felt when creating this."

She is telling us how she learned to thrive within constraints.

Here is another moment. It is a Saturday morning. I've let myself into her Assisted Living apartment and found her sitting on the closed toilet, wet white hair still dripping, wrapped in a bright turquoise bath towel. She is pink-cheeked, cozy, and animated as she commiserates with Mikah, one of the aides at her facility who has just helped her shower, about the challenges of raising a teenage daughter. Her face lights up as I enter the bathroom. "But after the hell of teenage years," she tells Mikah, reaching out to cup my cheeks in her hands and pull me towards her for a kiss, "you end up with this at the other side. A wonderful daughter."

Mikah, a woman with the same extravagant warmth as my mother, smiles broadly. "You promise?"

My mother solemnly claps her hand over her heart.

The death certificate showed "Failure to Thrive" as the cause of my mother's passing.

"This condition is most commonly seen in the frail elderly who may not have one specific terminal illness, but may have one or more chronic illness," explains a Stanford palliative care site. "In the absence of a known terminal illness, these patients often have poor appetite, loss of weight, increased fatigue, and a progressive functional decline." Another search yields a list of all the symptoms she had – these, plus difficulty swallowing and, most shockingly, "despair."

When she could no longer thrive, my mother died of despair.

Fifteen years after Paul Broks wrote about what doesn't lie behind the face, he wrote another book about the nature of consciousness. This one was inspired, at least in part, by the death of his wife, and in it, he shows signs that his thinking had changed.

"The Victorian artist Samuel Palmer said a picture was 'something between a thing and a thought. The same can be said of a person,' he said. "Painting and human bodies are physical objects that can be weighed, measured, and analyzed in different ways, structurally, chemically, and so on. But in each case the material form is only a part of what we see. When we look at a picture, Palmer's *Cornfield by Moonlight*, say, it's not the paper, the paint, the ink and varnish we see. It's not just the depiction of a man and his dog in a wheat field under the light of the waxing crescent moon and the evening star. We are transported beyond the physical and the literal into the numinous, into a world of gods and spirits.

Something similar happens when we look at one another. We can't help it, even if we don't believe in gods and spirits."

I've never seen *Cornfield by Moonlight*, but I think he's saying that the soul isn't something internal or intrinsic or even individual. It's co-created by two people bound by love, a product of intimacy and the pulsing, durable desire to know and be known.

And now here I am, sitting in front of the last Hyman Bloom painting in the exhibit. My feet are spread far apart on the floor; my hands on either side of my hips pressing into the bench as if, knowing my legs are inadequate to the task, already preparing to push myself up. I'm studying a picture of an old, old woman, nude. Her breasts sag down to her belly. Her belly, flaccid and broad, hangs over her crotch like a warped and fallen shelf. Her head is tilted, the scalp pink and mottled beneath her sparse white hair. She looks like my mother. But her eyes, penetrating and almost angry, challenge ... who? The painter? The viewer?

I sit there, tongue protruding from the corner of my mouth, and realize I have mirrored her pose. I have become the old lady looking back at her.

A friend suggested that I consider the difference between photography and painting or drawing – the art produced with hands as well as eyes.

Photography, I said, is capturing something external. Art is releasing something internal.

My distinction was facile and probably false. But the tension between capture and release, that's real.

I fell in love with photography when I saw the magic of an image emerging like a birth. But once there, while it can fade, it can never vanish back into the paper. Which is more like death – the vanishing or the persisting? And what is mourning but a desperate attempt to reel in the essence of the person we have so fiercely loved and also the letting go?

After months of remembering only his last days, I saw my younger, healthier father in a dream. We were in the kitchen making peanut butter and banana sandwiches together. It was the perfect memory of a man who found and made magic in the quotidian details of life.

Similarly, about six months after her death, my mother returned in all her glory one late August afternoon at a lake in southwestern Vermont. The rippling glitters of orange leaves reflected in the water reminded me of a boat ride she and my daughter Katie had taken in our beloved Lac Archambault.

Katie couldn't have been more than six or seven years old, because my mother was still fit enough to row out to the middle of the lake. Swimming alongside them, I heard snatches of the songs they sang together. Then, running out of tunes they both knew, my mother cut loose. Adopting a faux operatic soprano, she sang in invented Italian at the top of her lungs, her notes colliding with the mountains and bounding back.

Then and now, in this landscape she loved, I see the oars create a fluid channel. Then, implacable, the water returns. Still, I see a shimmering wake.

My memoir in essays, *This All-at-Oneness*, was named one of Kirkus Review's 100 Best Indie Books of 2019, and I am also the author of the newly released novel, *Burning and Dodging*, which Kirkus described as "An astute and absorbing study of personal growth, human connection, and the nature of reality." I write and teach both fiction and creative nonfiction and have an MFA from Lesley University. My essays and stories have appeared in numerous literary journals, including as *Shenandoah*, *The Writer's Chronicle*, *Ninth Letter*, *Eleven Eleven*, and *The Tampa Review*. I review books for *The ARTery*, and am a regular contributor to NPR station WBUR's journal of ideas and opinions, *Cognoscenti*.

Mouse in the House

By Jim Ross



Until the doctor fixed my left ear, it couldn't hear. The minus, was not hearing. The plus, was not hearing.

I can give you an example of a minus. I have to sleep on my right side most nights, even though sleeping on the left side is supposedly better for digestion. Sleeping on the right feels better with my back the way it is. That means that the pillow snugly embracing my downside ear (that's the right one) muffles any noise. And the upside ear (that's the left one), before going to the ear doctor, couldn't even hear a smoke alarm.

Now that the left ear is up to snuff, I can't sleep lying on my right side. I hear something scratching and ruffling at the other end of the room. It sounds faintly like somebody throwing dice and whispering, "snake eyes." I wonder, when did they get into the house? And what draws them upstairs that the kitchen doesn't offer?

The sound moves to the doorless closet three feet away. If I manage to fall asleep, and if this beast on tiny feet manages to find my face, will he tickle it with his tail? Paint on it? Try to eat my smile? Bite my nose to spite my face? If I say the magic word, will he turn into a coachman? And if so, where would we go and in what vehicle? Who is he, anyway? And who asked him in? Will I remain stuck in this limbo state with the uncanny mice?

It's constant, on or near the floor, probably in that little tray that holds two old pleather purses. He's getting louder because nobody has told him to shush. Slowly I turn, inch by inch, and arise in one motion. Do I still hear him? I flick on the lights. I shake the tray. Nothing. And no longer do I hear the incessant crackly nibbling. I flick off the light. I curl and roll back into bed. I lay on my right side, as before.

Soon, it begins again. Emboldened by invisibility, he seems confident that nobody will find him. Every time I cross the thin line between wakefulness and sleep, he rips me out again. No rest for the weary. He gets louder, the sound of defiance. I turn on my back, insert index fingers in both ears, and shout, "Lalalalalalala." I remove my fingers. It worked.

Peace and quiet has been restored. I figure it's safe now to let myself drift off. But once again, as I pass into dreamland, he yanks me out, as if either he requires an audience or has a vested interest in my not sleeping. He's determined to pen me in, in between.

I curl and roll, sitting upright on the bed's edge in the dark, with my feet planted firmly on the floor. He hasn't lowered his volume. If anything, he's accentuating the bass notes and picking up the tempo.

I jump up, flick on the lights, and without hesitation dive-bomb the tray holding two pleather purses. One after the other, I turn the purses upside down and shake so the hungry musician who only plays when I want to sleep will drop out. Plenty of things fall out

but he's not among them. I check the crevices and side compartments before throwing both purses aside. Where is the damn sound coming from?

I leave the room, pee, return, and stand in quiet contemplation of the closet floor, feeling no animosity toward my fellow creature. I can't hear a sound. I flick off the light, curl and roll back into bed, and fall asleep lying on my right side, with the formerly bad ear sunnyside up.

I hear him inching closer across the floor. I wait for the right moment, remembering what someone once said, "Don't shoot till you see the whites of their eyes." Sensing the metaphorical whites of his eyes, I curl, roll out of bed, and end up vertical. My left big toe rests on something other than just the floor. I've trapped him. Perhaps I should patent my left big toe. I flick on the light with my right hand and look down to witness my prisoner.

WObviously, I caught him by stepping on one of his giant, floppy ears. Indeed, I've captured Dumbolina. Obviously, he must be a mere passer through, not the crackly nibbler.

I wake at the same nerve-wracking sound, backed by rhythmic drumming. I laugh, realizing that Dumbolina was merely a dream. How could I know? It's time to get control of reality. Who has taken up residence in the closet? Does he think I enjoy his midnight rock concerts? Why did Jimi Hendrix pick tonight to visit me? Is this the revival of Woodstock? Is this vengeance because I failed to make it to Woodstock? And what the hell does Hendrix want?

If I hadn't gone to see the damned ear doctor, who oozed excitement as he regaled me with tales of once working with rat fetuses, I wouldn't be able to hear Hendrix's incessant nibbling with strong bass notes backed by Charlie Watts on drums. Who let Watts in here anyway? Oh, Hendrix did. I get it, now I know what's coming down. No further explanation needed.

As I was saying, had I not gone to the ear doctor, who seemed to get off on playing with my left ear, I wouldn't have stepped on poor Dumbolina's ear with my left big toe. None of this would've happened. I would have drifted off to dreamland, to be interrupted now and then by calls of nature, rather than stuck here in between. No cranky nibbler, no Jimi, no Charlie. All of which is to say, don't bother with mouse traps. Just stay away from ear doctors and you'll sleep like a baby. Now let me get to sleep before Janis Joplin shows up.



Jim Ross jumped into creative pursuits in 2015 after a rewarding career in public health research. With a graduate degree from Howard University, in six years he's published nonfiction, poetry, and photography in over 175 journals and anthologies on five continents. Publications include 580 Split, Bombay Gin, Burningword, Camas, Columbia Journal, Hippocampus, Journal of Compressed Creative Arts, Kestrel, Lunch Ticket, Manchester Review, Stonecoast, The Atlantic, and Typehouse, with Newfound forthcoming. Jim's recently-published photo essays include Barren, DASH, Kestrel, Litro, New World Writing, Sweet, So It Goes, and Wordpeace, with Typehouse forthcoming. Jim has also published graphic nonfiction pieces based on old postcards, such as Barren, Ilanot Review, and Litro, with Palaver forthcoming. A nonfiction piece led to appearances in a high-profile documentary limited series broadcast internationally. Jim and his wife-parents of two health professionals and grandparents of five little ones-split their time between city and mountains.

By Allie Coppola

I'm in the place where words can't reach me. I come here sometimes. When words become superfluous I return to the room with no windows and I close the door. It is underground and smells of must. It's dark and cold and moldy. I'm allergic to it all. I cannot hear when I am told it will get better. In the dark room of the sad place, do not try to speak to me; I cannot hear *your* words. All I have are *my* words— thinking and formatting, refining and revising, re-envisioning and renegotiating, restating and rephrasing. I am a lackluster lexicon, slipshod syntax, dilapidated diction; a selection of sounds seeking to share, to explain, to release. My words crash inside my skull like bumper cars. The why's, the what if's, the how come's? They slam from my frontal bone to my parietal, from my occipital bone to my temporal, thrashing through my amygdala, tearing across Broca's area, hacking up my hippocampus. The words don't stop, even when I can't remember why I think them.

When I try to avoid my words I take a walk and listen to someone else's. I plug my ears with AirPods and crank the volume and move my legs and listen. I then try to think my words over the words on the recording. I turn it up and rewind. I listen to Glennon Doyle tell me to sink. She tells me to "be still and know." I still avoid the stillness. I listen to Brené Brown implore me to leap into the arena. She tells me I'm no happier sitting safely on the sidelines. If the stands were safe I wouldn't have so many silent words. I listen to Elizabeth Gilbert tell me what makes a magic life, to chase curiosity, to release the myth of passion. I listen as all of these women tell me to write my words. *You're a writer*, they whisper into the mic. *You wouldn't think you were if you weren't*. Sometimes I scoff, but mostly I cry. If that were true, I'd do something with all these words. Glennon tells me to stop asking people for directions to places they have never been. I don't listen and ask everyone for directions to everywhere. This does not make sense, though, because I've been here before.

I don't know how I get here. The trail is dusty and fuzzy and hazy. There was once grass, but nothing is green. Everything is brown and muted and dim. The mangled trees are bare and line a dry copper path that twists and turns for miles. There is nothing but smog in the distance. This is the road to the wordless place.

In the place where words can't reach me I still have my words but they've lost their shine. They're dusty and dull like the road. They feel cumbersome and hollow. They are tired. My words feel heavier here. Like they've been marching in the same formation for so long they've forgotten how to move any other way. Like they've been saying the same things for so long they don't know what else to say. They bump and bounce and tease that I will always end up back here, in the place where I cannot be reached. The words tell me I'm unworthy. They say I'm unlovable. I won't hear you say the opposite, don't bother using *your* words with me here.

I know this is not true, that I am not unworthy of love. When the door is open I smile wide and laugh loud and take up space. In the world where words *can* reach me I believe you when you tell me you love me, when you say that you care. Words mean something to me. Words of affirmation, congratulations, words that seek to speak what the soul searches to say— words are the most magical thing humans have made. Animals have been found to use sound and gesture to communicate— to ask, to respond, to warn. Like us, animals have signals. Unlike animals, we have words. The creation and utilization of language is our magnum opus, though it doesn't seem to be helping me now.

In high school, I took an anthropology class that introduced linguistics. I found this to be so interesting that I signed up for a linguistics course in college. I learned all about morphemes and phonemes, glottal sounds, and vocal fries. I soon abandoned linguistics and earned my B.A. in English, with a minor in anthropology. It turns out I care much more about why we use words than how we use them. We use our words to write our stories, to share our stories. We use words to connect, to inform, to implore. We use words to bridge the gaps that separate us, break the binds that hold us, to reframe what defines us. I got my M.F.A. in creative writing to better use my words, to help people find and make sense of theirs. But my words are still so tired. They feel so hollow and brown.

Sitting in a writer's workshop on a coastal Connecticut island, my classmates discussed their ticks as writers, what their essays kept returning to: the color pink, the Pacific Northwest, a preoccupation with sleep. I flippantly teased that I don't have one, as I tore open my third teabag of the hour. I collected my manuscript in my hands and tapped the dented pages down on the desk in an attempt to make them uniform. Ana Maria, a *real* writer, looked at me warmly and earnestly. "It's your family," she said. "You always go back to that."

I recently learned that analyzing trauma is a trauma response. That it's too many layers of words away from the actual trauma. In my case, using words to talk about the wounds that break me doesn't heal, it only deepens the fracture. I use words to disconnect, to disembodify, to deploy my awareness from the present. How wild that words can be a shiny invitation to dissociate, no matter how brown they feel.

I was recently on a call with a spiritual life coach and he told me I didn't think myself into trauma. The feelings made the wounds. *No one can make you feel anything*. The stories I built around the feelings are what bump and rattle in my brain. I can't think myself out of trauma because I didn't think myself into it. I've *thought* myself out of the feelings. I now have to *feel* myself out of the thoughts.

In the place where words can't reach me, I see in movies: images, clips, feelings, and sounds. I am paralyzed inside a trauma montage of brick walls and squeaky swings. Stuck on a loop of dead brothers and absent mothers. And then the trauma show unfurls and lays out flashes of high school and college and grad school and post-grad. spurts of self-harm, self-loathing, of sexual assault.

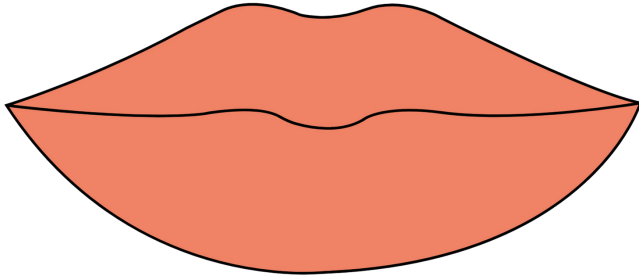
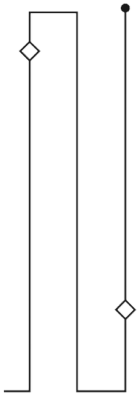
I had a therapist explain the "window of tolerance," which is the space on the emotional spectrum where most emotionally stable people live. Unprocessed trauma triggers a response outside the window of tolerance. Well-adjusted people function closer towards 1 and when they're met with challenge and struggle they fall somewhere towards the middle of the spectrum. They raise their voices. They slam a door. My therapist told me I live at a 7. It takes very little to propel me off the chart, out the window, onto the path to the place where words can't reach.

I tried EMDR, or eye movement desensitization and reprocessing therapy, which is meant to lessen the reaction to trauma events stored in the brain. My therapist placed a vibrating device she called a bilateral in each of my hands and they alternated pulsing while I let my mind wander through my trauma movie montage. She told me I had to submit, to give over to the memories, to feel the feelings. She would periodically pause the bilateral vibrations and ask me to describe the scene I was in. I wondered if she was analyzing what I saw, because I am story-driven and analysis prone and my words are all I have. I later discovered she was listening not for what I said, but how I sounded. For cracks in my voice, some form of strain, of pain, of emotional unrest. She told me it wasn't working because I wasn't feeling. I was too busy thinking and waiting for words.

In the place where words can't reach me I feel like I could blow away. I feel like I need to be cemented into the floor, strapped down to my bed, nailed into the wall. I feel a void so deep and wide and empty in my chest even air refuses to stay. I feel a chill so sharp and cold and biting I may never be warm again. Under four blankets, a quilt, and two comforters, I shake to the music of my montage. I tell you I want to crawl into your skin, but even that wouldn't be close enough. I think: I want to climb inside you. I want our bones to fuse and our blood to merge. I want to feel the fullness of two people in one body, filling the void of air and heart and breath. I want to fit so tightly there isn't space to move, there is hardly room to breathe. I want to feel only your heartbeat as my body becomes yours and I disappear. I want to be so close I cease to exist. Once we are fused, and right before I'm gone, I want my words to drip from our ears, leaving nothing but the sound of silence, which really sounds more like vibrating and beeping and ringing. Which really sounds like all the things I cannot say. But I won't need to say them anymore—they'll have already been inside our ears and fallen out. We don't need my words because we are just the feeling of tight arms and warm skin. We will smell of vanilla and shampoo and detergent. It will no longer be silent. All we will hear is the sound of your strong and steady heartbeat guiding us closer to the feeling of home.

Spiritual teachings tell me separation is an illusion. That we are all one. That we are all connected. That the only thing that isolates me is my perception. Perception is projection. I project my trauma movies on the big screen. My words are married to this story. My words are so tired.

In the place where words can't reach me, I *feel* unlovable. Those words are tired, too. I feel



stuck floating in the montage, drowning in my illusions of abandonment, and I can't hear that you love me, but I can hear your heartbeat. I can smell your detergent. I can't crush my bones into yours, but I can feel your collarbone underneath my cheek, and your hand on my side. I can feel your arms wrapped around my chest and your deep inhale, then exhale. I can feel you bringing me home. I can't be talked out of the place where words can't reach me. I can only feel the warmth of your body and follow where you lead.

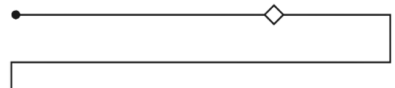
When I am alone, I lie on my stomach and wrap my arms around a pillow so tightly I wake up sore. I crush myself under a 25 pound weighted blanket. I sometimes pile pillows over my head. I seek to fill the space around me to shrink the space inside me. How ironic that my body craves to be crushed the way my heart has felt. So ironic that even now I attempt to use words to convey the wordlessness.

Spiritual teachings tell me we are all just walking each other home. That we are perpetually, simultaneously alone on our journeys and one with humanity— there is no separation. We all have the words. We all *are* the words.

My words aren't serving me anymore. They are too tired and too brown. The stories are mechanical. They take off and land in Alaska. It's dark all the time. Perhaps to resuscitate the words, I must be wordless. To connect with humanity, I must disconnect from story. The stories I've been telling myself don't allow for stillness. The stories I tell myself have me asking for directions to a path I know.

I cry the most in the place where words can't reach me. I try to explain why, but my words don't reach outside the door. The movie keeps playing. Sometimes I submit. Often I just squeeze myself, breathing in my lotion, feeling my brain bump and my heart pound and my tears run. Feeling my body feel, while I wait for my words to be reached and for the story to change. Feeling the feelings I use my words to think away. Feeling my way towards a new story with words that shine.

Allie graduated from Fairfield University with an MFA in creative writing. She has previously been published in *Caustic Frolic*, *Urban Ivy*, and *Dove Tales Journal*. She is a writing coach and consultant, wildly inspired by the complexities of the human condition, and acutely intrigued by how her inner dialogue so deeply affects her ability to heal and grow.





Waiting January to January

By Marie H. Curran



I'm not sure where to begin. Ten years ago, or weeks ago.

Both were Januarys.

The January of ten years ago began with a head cold, and January 2022 began with a desire to avoid a head cold.

Ten years ago, when the then head cold rolled in and worsened, and I began struggling to stay awake at my accounting job, I ended up at my GP's surgery. A place I wasn't overly accustomed to. As one GP had said only weeks previously, during my annual bloods, I was his healthiest patient. I wasn't healthy on that visit or the ten other visits that late winter and early spring.

By April 2012, things were bad, work was falling from a cliff edge, and I'd given up my social life – which at the age of 31 was a big deal. An even bigger one was my participation in my local athletic club, where months earlier, I'd competed in my first full marathon after countless half marathons.

Getting sick of me, my GP referred me to my first consultant. He pulled me into the hospital for two nights and two days of luxurious breakfasts in bed and copious tests.

On Friday, April 13th, I was diagnosed with ME. Myalgic Encephalomyelitis.

My second consultant, a man I pledged allegiance to and hoped would get my life back, told me marathons were out.

I tried to ask him questions, namely, what the hell was ME, but every time I spoke, he held his hand up and said, "I'm the doctor. I'll do the talking."

Refusing to be silenced, I managed, between fits of attempts, to get an entire sentence in, asking if he'd read the e-mail I'd sent him prior to my visit. An e-mail setting out a long list of concerns.

Looking towards the floor and then at me, the way a wise old elder stares at the two-year-old swinging herself around in circles and giggling at the silliness of light-headedness, he said sharply, "No, I didn't have time to read your e-mail."

Instead of reading, he gave me an exercise plan akin to a rehab plan and told me this was my way back. I sighed a brief sigh of relief and then read the details of the plan.

It included an exercise bike. I didn't own an exercise bike.

I explained this and enlightened him to the fact that if I drove to my nearest gym to exercise on a bike for two minutes and then drove home again, I'd be in bed for a week.

I asked for the plan to be amended so as to exercise within the bounds of my own home.

He refused any such addendums, snapped the plan from me, tutted, and glared as though I'd uttered a

profanity or distasteful commentary. Glaring back at him, the months of frustration held between my eyes and ears burst like a demonic dam, wiping away cars and houses, villages and towns, even a city.

I cried, I cursed, and then, when taking my first deep breath, I found my fist pounding his mahogany desk.

Stroking it calmly, as though soothing a tempestuous cat, I sat back in my chair, smiling meekly, waiting with bounds of courtesy for the god to speak, only there were no words.

Standing abruptly, keeping his eyes on me, he walked gently towards his door, opened it, and nodded towards his secretary.

Walking quietly past him, he handed me something, a business card, telling me, "I want you to see her before you ever see me again."

Looking down at the card, the word "Psychotherapist" glared up at me as I spat, "you want me to see who?"

"To discuss your anger issues."

Backing out his door, holding my tongue and writing his receptionist a cheque for 280 euros for the pleasure of his company, I thought, anger, he wanted me to pay someone to discuss my anger towards him?

Sitting back in my GP's office days later, she apologized, saying she was aware of his temperament. Digging out any other available snippets of help, as there were no ME experts in Ireland, a rehab specialist was eventually discovered.

In the meantime, I had to quit work. It was either quit or be fired, and given my manager in France was talking to my manager in Ireland about that very topic, I had to pull the plug and stop hiding in the bathroom and sleeping on the toilet seat.

Then I waited.

I waited until August. It was London 2012, Katie Taylor won gold. Ireland was on a high. I was on my ass.

My third consultant was nice, empathetic, and advised she had no clue about ME but knew about rehab. My body was on the floor, and the silent mantra became "let the build-up begin."

GET – Graded Exercise Therapy – began. I won't bore you with those 18 months of hell. Let's just say it didn't work. There was no building me up again. Exercise, it turned out, made ME worse. There are a plethora of studies to prove this. It's just a pity I didn't see any until I'd spent 18 months on and off a treadmill, swirling in pain and fatigue and going through lengthy periods where making it to the bathroom was my London 2012 gold medal.

There are conspiracy theories surrounding one study, whereby researchers supposedly proved exercise made ME better. The problem with this particular study is that the definition of ME is very loose, and the definition of better, equally as loose.

I spoke to one of the authors of this study on national radio by accident and asked about the criteria in his study; I'm still awaiting a direct response.

All I knew was that exercise made ME worse. There's even a symptom to prove this. PEM – post-exertional malaise – meaning an ME patient's symptoms are exasperated upon physical and mental

exertion. I promise I'm not setting you up for a pop quiz, it's just a point of interest for you to take away or bin, that's up to you.

In January 2014, I was pulled off GET, and aside from my GP cheering me from the sidelines, I was on my own. Left entirely to my own devices as to what the hell I was going to do with this ME thing.

Luckily, I always liked myself.

I should point out, the path was not made entirely on my own; I do have a long-suffering husband by my side. A man I married one year before I got sick. And as is said, in sickness and in health...

Without GET and without the need to keep pushing my damaged body, and although no one could tell me what exactly was wrong with me, in 2015, I began listening to my eclectic insides, realizing my pulse was an indicator. Keep it at rest, and I could avoid crashing.

Light bulbs were smashed.

I stopped crashing. I got to a baseline and steady state. I was living with ME.

That is, if living meant I was housebound 90% of the time, and a good day was light housework with some light weeding or pottering in the garden between resting and pacing. I had bad days too, 2 or 3 days a week, where I sat out any planned pottering and rested up to avoid a crash.

Then Covid-19 and the question to vaccinate or not came along.

Given I was housebound and any time I left the house, I wore a medical grade mask, given that my husband was fully vaccinated and cautious, I was happy to think we could keep the thing that shall not be named out.

Our house became a military zone. All social visitors remained outdoors, windows were opened religiously, and a HEPA filter and house plants were used to clean the air.

Any time my husband attended a function – which was seldom – he wore his mask and upon return home, kept his mask on and kept his distance from me for 14 days.

By the end of 2021, I was aware of severe reactions in what appeared to be a subset of ME patients to the Covid-19 vaccine. In New Zealand, there were calls for medical exemptions for ME patients, and I had my long-standing GP - who retired just before Covid – swirling about my head. In all her years in my corner, she'd never allowed me to take up the flu vaccine, stating my body ran the risk of a full relapse.

Then came Omicron. As you know, vaccination won't stop my husband from picking up the thing, and vaccination won't stop him from passing it to me. Ireland was about to re-open itself fully, and the only words in the air were "Covid's over." Of course, the true words were, roll up, roll up, everyone's going to get it. I didn't want it.

On January 21st, 2022, I took my first dose of the vaccine. I won't tell you which one for now.

I crashed two hours later. I'm still crashed. (It's been six and a half weeks).

I feel as though I'm right back at the beginning 10 years ago and all the hard work I put in to get to a nice steady state has been lost.

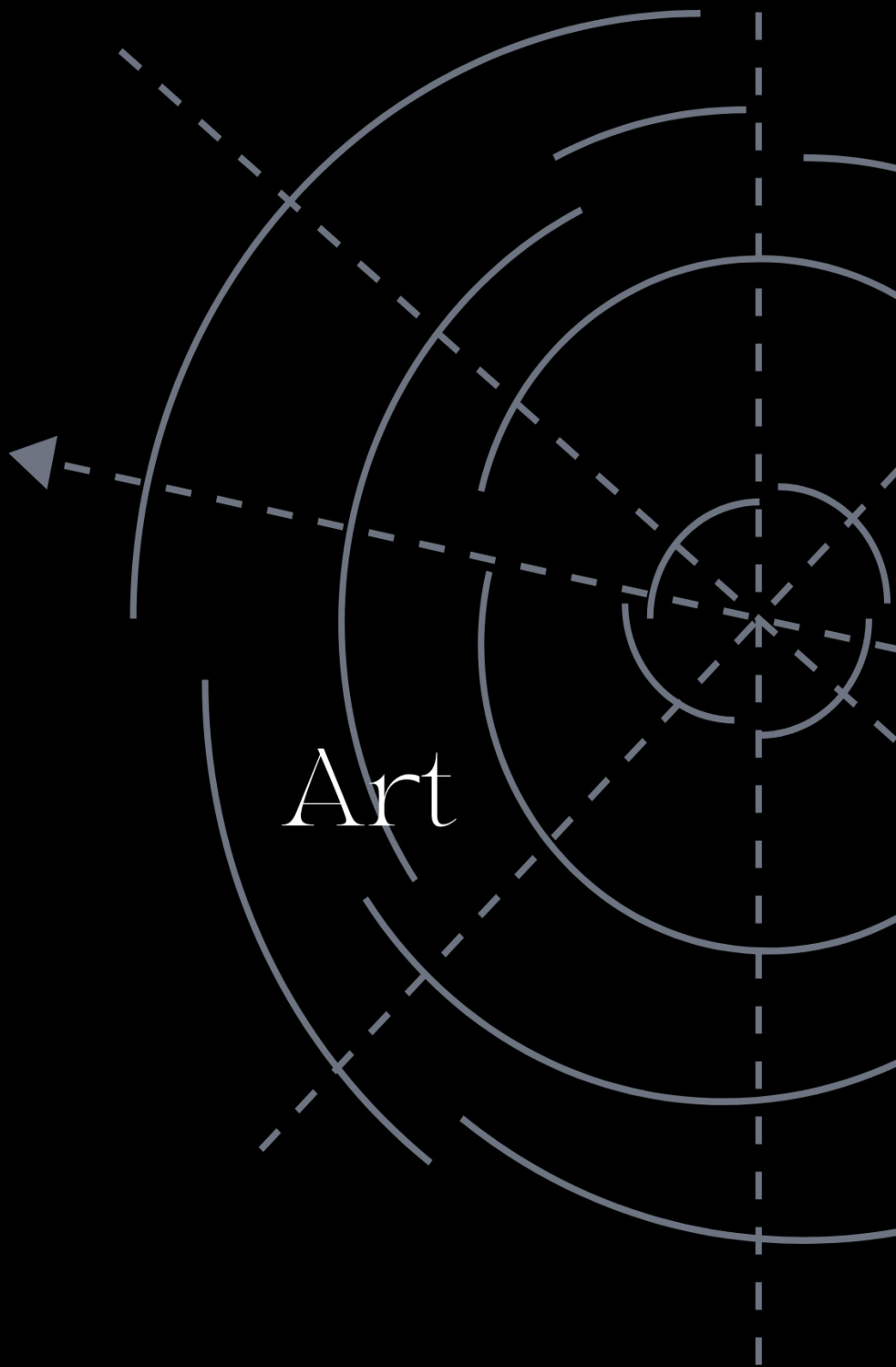
I'm operating at 50% of where I was pre-vaccine, and my new GP, my day in the hospital for tests, and the new consultant I met there, have all confirmed there's no magic wand. I just have to sit it out.

The belief is the vaccine turned on part of my immune system already on or damaged by ME, and my body's not capable of turning that immune response off. It is hoped four months from vaccination my body should shut down this response as the vaccine wanes and I should find that steady state once more.

For now, I sit and do what I've learnt to do best. I wait.



Observant Observings (Tayen Lane, 2014) was my first published poetry collection, other poetry, short stories and non-fiction can be found in journals, magazines, (ROPES 2015, JuxtaProse, The Scarlet Review,) and Irish newspapers (The Irish Independent, The Irish Examiner). My regular column can be read in the magazine, Athenry News and Views.



Art



How We Move The Light

By Emily Calvo

Watercolor on paper 14x10 in.

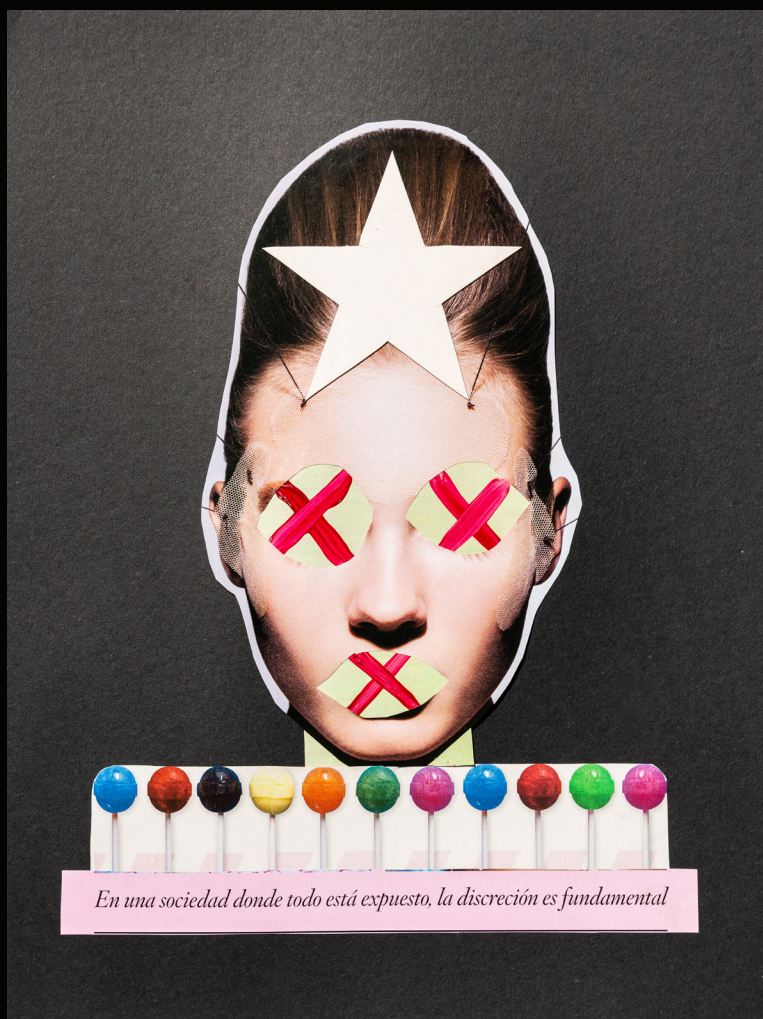
A visual artist, poet, and author, Emily Thornton Calvo often merges her poetry with her art. She's exhibited at the Elmhurst Art Museum, August House Gallery, Gallery 1070, the Art Center Highland Park, and others. She's performed poems at Loyola University and the Art Institute of Chicago through the Poetry Foundation. Her work has appeared in Roosevelt University's Oyez Review, Coleré, After Hours, Lucidity and other print and online journals. Lending Color to the Otherwise Absurd, her first book of poems and art, was released with a grant from Chicago's Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events. Her poems have appeared Calvo co-founded Chicago Slam Works and was also a poet-in-residence through The Poetry Center of Chicago's Hands on Stanzas program. Her work is found at emilycalvo.com.

Atmosfear

By Seigar

Multiple Collages 2/21 of the collection

This collage series explores the concepts of cancel culture, censorship, control, propaganda, and the manipulation of the media and social networks. The intention is to show, expose and denounce these dangerous issues, and the need to fight for freedom. The inspiration can be found in the situations people are experiencing in their everyday life and the vigilant processes of personal data. Pop images of hard oppressions and clear statements were used to reinforce the atmosphere of fear. Stop it! Everybody should live with no fear. The world is in our hands. Together and free.





Seigar is a passionate travel, street, social-documentary, conceptual, and pop visual artist based in Tenerife, Spain. He feels obsessed with the pop culture that he shows in his works. He has explored photography, video art, writing, and collage. He writes for some media. His main inspirations are traveling and people. His aim as an artist is to tell tales with his camera, creating a continuous storyline from his trips and encounters. He is a philologist and works as a secondary school teacher. He is a self-taught visual artist, though he has done a two years course in advanced photography and one in cinema and television. He has participated in several international exhibitions, festivals, and cultural events. His works have been featured in numerous publications worldwide. His last interests are documenting identity and spreading the message of the Latin phrase: Carpe Diem. Recently, he received the Rafael Ramos Garcia International Photography Award. He shares art and culture in his blog: Pop Sonality.

Reflection Amid Chaos

By Emily Calvo

Watercolor on paper 10x8 in.

A visual artist, poet, and author, Emily Thornton Calvo often merges her poetry with her art. She's exhibited at the Elmhurst Art Museum, August House Gallery, Gallery 1070, the Art Center Highland Park, and others. She's performed poems at Loyola University and the Art Institute of Chicago through the Poetry Foundation. Her work has appeared in Roosevelt University's Oyez Review, Coleré, After Hours, Lucidity and other print and online journals. Lending Color to the Otherwise Absurd, her first book of poems and art, was released with a grant from Chicago's Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events. Her poems have appeared Calvo co-founded Chicago Slam Works and was also a poet-in-residence through The Poetry Center of Chicago's Hands on Stanzas program. Her work is found at emilycalvo.com.



Limbo Collection
By Bruno Manfredi
Five photographs



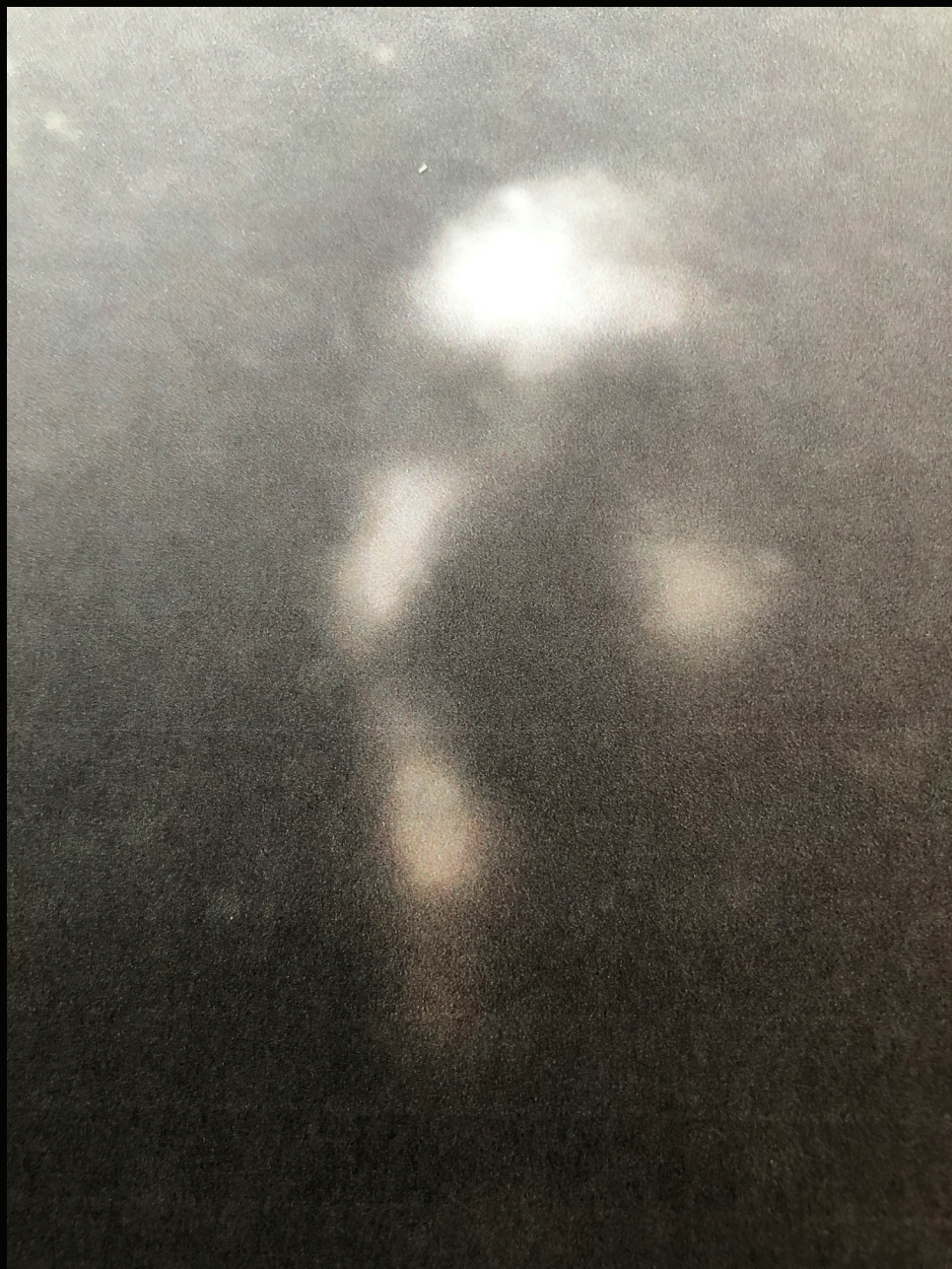
My Crisis
A selfie of my eye



Lockdown Life/Death
2020 during the lockdown. A photo of a painting from my daughter Tatiana
Manfredi.

Ireland Peace March

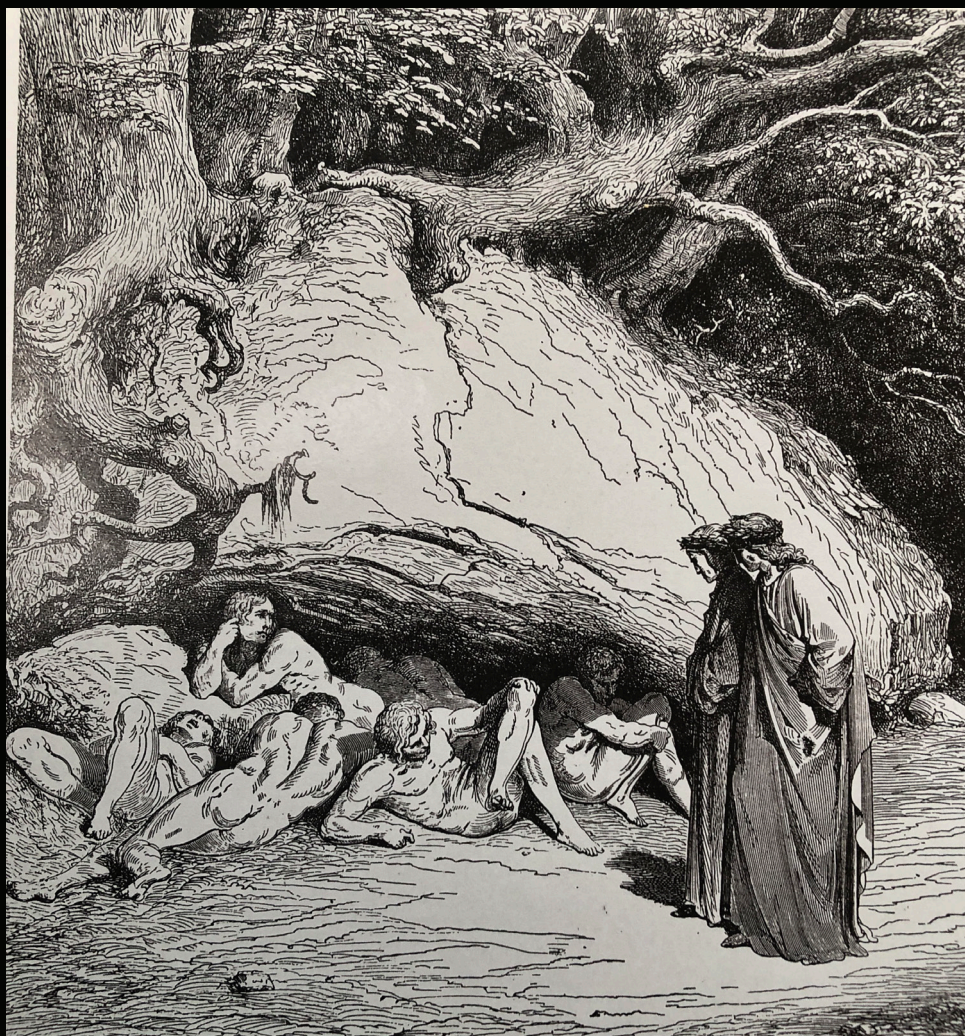
It's my initiation journey. The first trip alone, a march for peace. The photographer is unknown, perhaps a priest, don Tato. He died. It's my work restoring some analogic film and discovering my self in the darkness.



The Baptism

A few minutes after getting out from limbo. Photographer: my uncle Carlo Vaccheri. This is my father and me, 1951.





Dante in the Limbo Gravure

Studying Dante Alighieri in high school. Getting out of childhood. This is my photo from my friend's book (2021).

My name is Bruno Manfredi. My artist name is "In The Wind", Art and Creativity against all violence. During 14 years I had 360 events, 55 artistic projects, in 40 countries in the world.



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