

ENTERING

THE

CHAOS

EDITORIAL

CONTENT

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Order and Chaos - How would we know what light was if darkness didn't exist?
Emma Kendall

Special Thank You to

JJ Jacquet
Nicole Pandolfo

This edition was also made with the help of New York University's Graduate School of Arts and Sciences' XE: Experimental Humanities and Social Engagement Program.

Contact

19 University Place
New York City, NY

causticfrolic@gmail.com
(949)-701-1109
@causticfrolic

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Letter from the Editor

Dear readers, contributors, and staff,

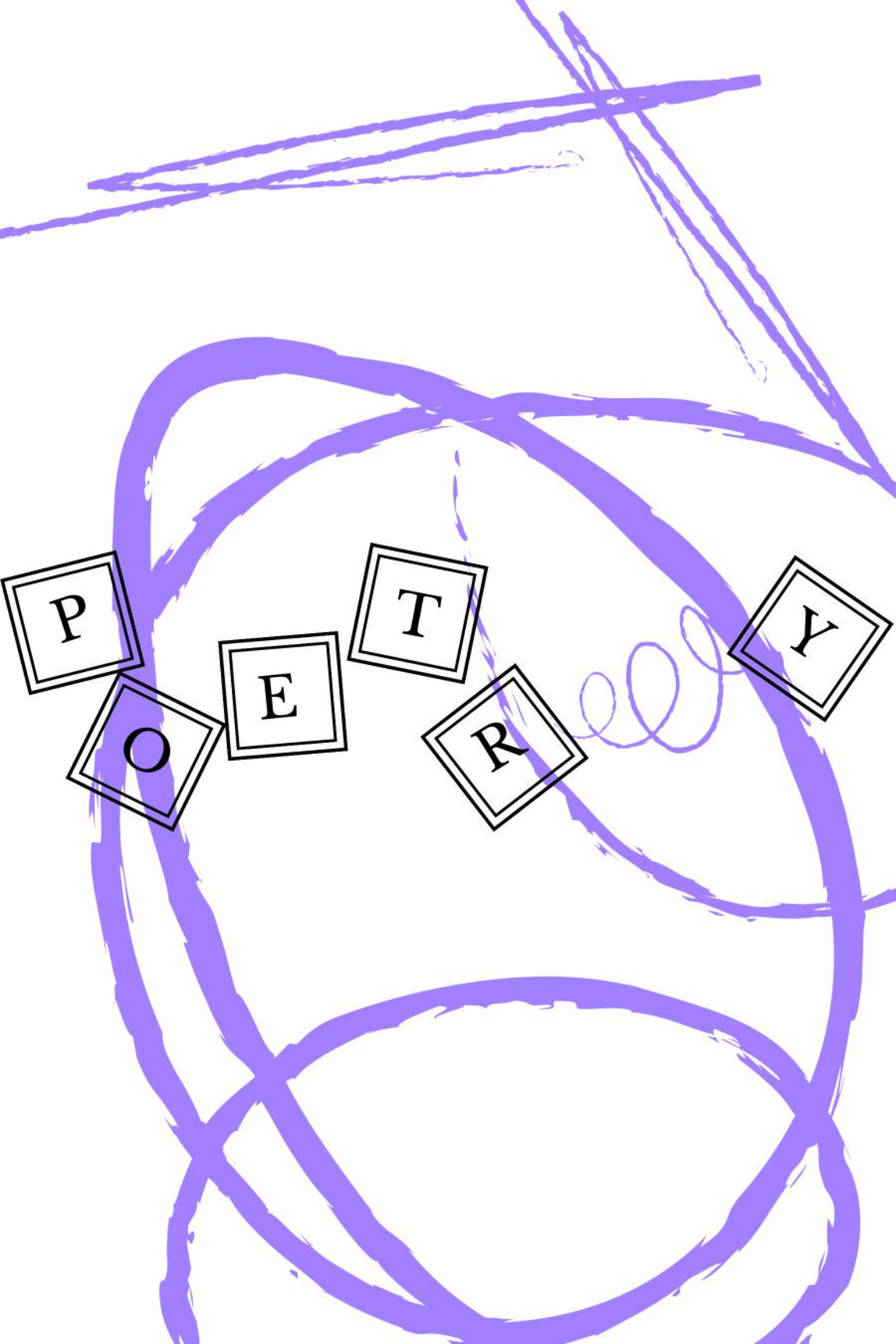
When I reflect on this past year, many breakthroughs came to mind. Covid-19 was calming down, normalcy was coming to NYU. However, my reflection process also allowed me to process the enhanced amount of chaos our country, or should I say the world is facing.

But in this issue, I invited all to reflect on their own chaos. I hope it makes, you, reader, reflect too.

Best,
Gabby Pardo, EIC



caustic
FROLIC



P

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By Heikki Huotari

Out of extrasensory perception, out of universal consciousness. The hornet swarm that doesn't scoff at prodding is the hornet swarm that fades. Yea though I walk in lighted aisles I fear no aftermath. My options puts and calls, from dearth to plethora the dots connected disappear. Some precedent slept here. If my redeemer will not work then my redeemer will not eat. From your facetious where's-the-fire to an ersatz precipice I glide. Stochastic mass a mass for all of that and protoplasmic, your location known to who you choose. To hear you with my big ears all the better, once the seventh is resolved it stays resolved. O one-celled animal, recidivist, what need have you of chemistry or conservation?

Heikki Huotari attended a one-room school and spent summers on a forest-fire lookout tower. Since retiring from academia/mathematics he has published poems in numerous journals and in five poetry collections, one of which won the Star 82 Press Book Award.

Honeydew, don'tcha know you cantaloupe with the melon man?

By Gerard Sarnat

"The more you learn about the dignity of the gorilla, the more you want to avoid people." - Dian Fossey

Shalom salaam shanti.

Digging deeper and deeper, primate just want sto give birth.

Breathe, pay attention, push as decades ago down the coast
pulling a slick Jeff Airplane babe into the world back of a flatbed
later on coaching out the same, your own firstborn in Pt. Reyes.

My wits become jumbled as the snack food.

Yummy gummy worms among mixed pyschonauts
couch-potato, yam sandwiched, Camembert too close for comfort
among grandmotherly raisins, prudish dates, maidenhead figs.

Dali biomorph gorp roasts snails and marshmallows
in a choir of pale Camp Fire Girls and Bluebird sopranos.

Robin redbreasts lay M&M eggs that singe my cortex
sing in my skull, don't melt in my mouth.

A rope-a-doped empty soda can can't bring order from chaos.

Instead I slake thirst

with reverse-engineered flavor-enhanced honeydew smartwater.

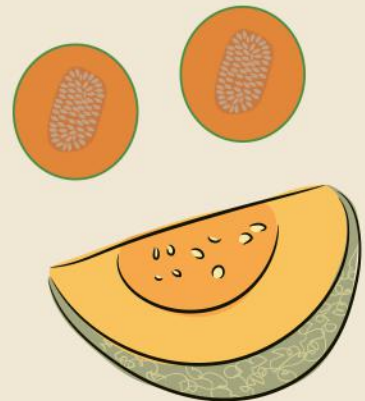
After sixty-odd years knocking at the door

more than half as husband and father

now not quite porpoise

the answer is constant birth.

I am a sunflower spurt open, bundled as laundry
handed over to Labor and Delivery.



My cranium is a nightingale heavy with young
a watermelon hatched in a wheelbarrow
bathed in an amnion of hummingbird dippers.



My cerebrum is a sponge crammed
in a pineapple crate inside a uterus on a Harley.

Wordsworth says, The child is father of the man.

Too much is happening: Puer Eternis aches to nest.

Push, push, deeper and deeper.

You must give birth.

An insurgent scouting the unknown, gleeful gravitas demented
this pleiotropic quest, sprouted wings, merged sacrament with play
renunciation with excess, never sure what's next, what to expect
how the mélange'll unfold — then stirred.

A wasted day of emotional slither?

What if I open the floodgates and there's no flood?

We'll see.

I don translucent eyeshades
go deeper much deeper inside
allow out out, let in in.



From pygmy forest nowheres, journey comrades arise.

Electric geckos slipslide buttery dendrites.

Thumbsized shortstops seduce butterfly axons.

Tarantulas summersault winterpepper synapses
catch in-field rye under cobweb trapdoors where king cobras
clench screams of near enemy yolk hunting for its teeth.

Holden, now that J.D.'s dead, will I grow up phony?

How do we know when we're done making love?

Gerard Sarnat has been nominated for the pending 2022 Science Fiction Poetry Association Dwarf Star Award, won San Francisco Poetry's 2020 Contest, the Poetry in the Arts First Place Award plus the Dorfman Prize, and has been nominated for handfuls of 2021 and previous Pushcarts plus Best of the Net Awards. Gerry is widely published including in 2022 Awakenings Review, 2022 Arts & Cultural Council of Bucks County Celebration, 2022 Rio Grande Valley International Poetry Festival Anthology, HitchLit Review, Lowestoft, Washington Square/NYU Review, The Deronda Review, Jewish Writing Project, Hong Kong Review, Tokyo Poetry Journal, Buddhist Poetry Review, Gargoyle, Main Street Rag, New Delta Review, Arkansas Review, Hamilton-Stone Review, Northampton Review, New Haven Poetry Institute, Texas Review, Vonnegut Journal, Brooklyn Review, San Francisco Magazine, Monterey Poetry Review, The Los Angeles Review, and The New York Times as well as by Slippery Rock, Northwestern, Pomona, Harvard, Stanford, Dartmouth, Penn, Columbia, North Dakota, McMaster, Maine, University of British Columbia and University of Chicago presses. He is a Harvard College and Medical School-trained physician who's built and staffed clinics for the marginalized as well as a Stanford professor and healthcare CEO. Currently he is devoting energy/ resources to deal with climate justice, and serves on Climate Action Now's board. Gerry's been married since 1969 with progeny consisting of four collections (Homeless Chronicles: From Abraham To Burning Man, Disputes, 17s, Melting the Ice King) plus three kids/ six grandsons — and is looking forward to potential future granddaughters.

if [empty] were a (space)

si. [t]. pen. paper. .[is]

o d [-d] [" love ---"

w s

r] it (pause)

ible]?!&*..

*sigh. write. sigh. [wr

i [te[s

]]]

punch---

[if]

*space]

By Alex Bastianini

Alex Bastianini is, currently, a MA student at Carnegie Mellon University and an occasional poet. Other works by Alex have appeared in Adelaide Literary Magazine and Teach. Write.: A Writing Teachers' Literary Journal.

Tomorrow Could Be a Sonnet

By Valerie Sopher

tomorrow is another day
we've seen before
another day of dodging exhales
the sun again falling and getting up

glowing horizons stretched thin with smoke
tomorrow is one more day of delta
breaches over sandbagged vaccines
a waiting room of doctors

who know no cure
tomorrow is another day
like today plodding along
like the day before that

confined to a book-lined room
where stories fail to fill wanderlust
where hope hides in an empty suitcase
with rusty hinges

tomorrow waits to board a plane
shoulder a carry-on crammed
with tumbling case numbers
forests that only smolder

but then, a stallion storm gallops through
the night, kicks over water troughs
ping pong rain balls bounce
off parched soil

and for the first time in a long time, tomorrow
could be a sonnet that blows a cool breeze
turning white wildfire ash into confetti
and to sodden, inhale to exhale

Valerie Sopher is grateful to Slant Poetry, Canary, Caustic Frolic, River Mouth Review, Quiet Diamonds (Orchard Street Press), Science Write Now and Wingless Dreamer (contest winner), among others, for publishing her work and to the Ina Coolbrith Circle Annual Poetry Contest and the Benicia Library Love Poetry Contest for honoring and selecting her poems. She is a singing quilter who loves anything to do with paper, pens and words. She lives in the San Francisco Bay Area.

A Parting is Still a Part

By Eli Coyle

Near me on the shore, a young woman presses her baby to her breast, a young man is a father and I am getting older on the edges of this lake. To think whatever is bigger sent me here to heal wounds once glued together, now divided—water and rock. This morning I woke to the sounds of my love leaving. Every morning she leaves, and I am left with the emptiness of autumn. It is a repetition in the body, a parting of lips perhaps with coffee. In the evenings after work, I plant my feet in the coarse sand of granulated granite and try to hold what is possible, such grief in summer sun. I'm trying to fill Lake Tahoe with more fuel for fracturing granite, so I cry, cry, cry fractions into a whole. But there is no solace here in the fading summer or in the young couple who mimic the outside, the outside that is always the inside raised to a condition of secrecy, a mirror within a mirror. Water and sky, one and the same—

The granite that may or may not
be in love with the lake



the lake
shaving pieces



into parts

a parting still leaves
remnants



How can something so soft
reduce



solidity?



her lips

breaking



one-ton boulders

from my face



Chisel me in softness, I think now, it is private enough to empty on the outer edges of these rocks. The young couple whose story I do not know—the intellect tries to make sense of the patterns outside, a story, a resemblance in the random Rorschach blots of a life. To be pulled apart by the wind, rippling waves across the lake. To love a thing too much, to let it go. I can't tell if this story is a peace or a part.

Who is to say

who is wiser—
water or rock?

One so soft
it erodes the other

The other a stability
a place to stand

in the great void.
Who is to say

they are inseparable?
Who is to say

how long
they've been doing this?



Near me on the shore, a young woman presses her baby to her breast, a young man is a father and I am getting older on the parts of this whole. Who is to say the outside salves the wounds without warning, or that the outside descends the sun and dissolves all boundaries without separation? Whatever is bigger arrives to teach you how to leave, or how to be left, chiseled from a whole shedding one ton boulders from my face.

Whereabouts Unknown

By Eli Coyle

My face feels like an emotional relief map
forever wet

My pockets are full of handkerchiefs
that never dry

My green corduroys lie crumpled
on the hardwood floor

saved for later =
our bodies wrapped
in the wax of each other

In the mornings the sky cracks open egg clouds
raining private rain

cloud hidden
whereabouts unknown

where I live alone like pith in trees—
mindless like tumbleweed
mindless like sages

Some days I carry on like a responsible hermit
forgetting my name

beneath the shade
of prickly pear cacti

silhouetting horned lizard

Where my trajectory
is a satellite crash landing

the thought of her
a space island

And in the absence of her touch, I am a tourist

I know when I'm home
in her eyes

that are the insides of arriving—
flickering hot fireplaces
seen through the windows

of a winter solstice

Where some days my eyes
are streetlights in the void

crisply burning

blinding the retinas
of untraveled directions—
beneath the boughs of pine trees

forever stuck between seasons
thawing and refreezing

That I am just as lost as anyone
ever looking for celestial footprints.



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 and prose have recently been published or are forthcoming in: Barely South Review, California Quarterly, Camas, Caustic Frolic, Hoxie Gorge Review, New York Quarterly, The Normal School, Permafrost Magazine, Soundings East, and The South Carolina Review among others.



My Mother's Strainer

orange painted metal
with equal-sized holes
stood on our kitchen counter
beside the ceramic sink.

it collected old coffee grains,
orange peels, prune pits,
and dead flowers from the garden
she nurtured more than the little girl in me.

every few days she'd hold
each side by their handles
and rush to our compost heap
in the far end of the yard
near our grouchy neighbor's fence.

once in a while he'd scream
that she attracts
the street's rodents
and that the pile of shit
will not yield her better tasting vegetables.

she'd walk away, hands on hips,
muttering under her breath
as he yelled out that she
was a weird eccentric lady
with priorities out of order.
my father would walk to our
screen door and apologize for her
like he'd done thousands of times before.

this woman who strains, filters and distills
all that comes before her
as if she had a sense of it all.



Diana Raab, PhD, is an award-winning memoirist, poet, blogger, speaker, and author of 10 books and is a contributor to numerous journals and anthologies. Her two latest books are, "Writing for Bliss: A Seven-Step Plan for Telling Your Story and Transforming Your Life," and "Writing for Bliss: A Companion Journal." Her poetry chapbook, "An Imaginary Affair," is forthcoming in July 2022 with Finishing Line Press. She blogs for Psychology Today, Thrive Global, Sixty and Me, Good Men Project, and The Wisdom Daily and is a frequent guest blogger for various other sites.

Roaring Twenties

By Olivia Thorne

Falling through
The shelves of the school
I had been pushing against
Since I was as tall as the first plank

Pressing my ear
So as to hear
The world that lay hidden and ahead.

Now I am here
It's not the speakeasy I had imagined
For easy is not the word.

Why didn't you tell me
That some of us
Are not taught the chords
So can we not play our symphonies inside?

And now I am underneath this dreamless sky
I find it impossible to think
Amidst this brassy cacophony.

I know I am only twenty-one
But I already feel older than my mother's rings
Which waft her fingers
Among other things.

Yes, I am twenty-one
And 'in my prime'
As though I am a sugary dessert
Served for those with a sweet-tooth
Of which I allow myself none
To remain good enough
For
Some
One.

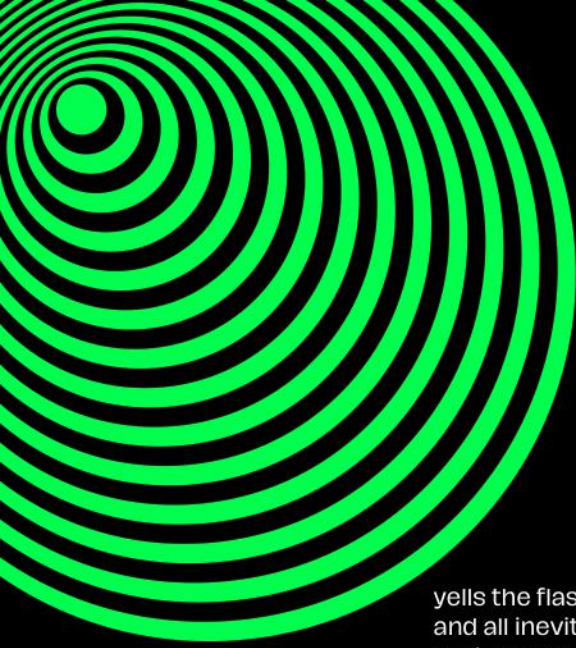
Yes, my tongue is young
But I have always traced the truth
Or at least my truth
Into the pale ice cream scoop
I have not tasted
Since egoless youth.

Fleabag shouted through the letter box
Adorned on the door
Oof her father's London home
I have no such mouthpiece.

So, I open my notes app
Bounding through London's intestinal tubes
Trying not to be digested entirely
As I invest myself in into you.

I am through the bookcase
Into my own roaring twenties
Trying not to think
About the picture-book old days.

I am a recent graduate from UCL having studied English Language and Literature. I am state educated and from the North West, having lived in both Southport and Manchester and have feel that the change from this part of the country to London is a big source of inspiration for my work. I am currently writing my own play and have a passion also for acting and performing.



Incident in the Tunnel

By Kate Stanner-Maxwell

yells the flashing neon font above my head, all caps and all inevitable, goading me to skull slam into headrest, gasp a final breath of relatively fresh air before the creep and clog of carbon monoxide fingers at the flesh of my mouth, siphoning ghoulish kiss deep into lungs with the thick grey fog of first world loss. Tagged an incident as if nothing ever happens in the tunnel. Should we be happy for the tunnel? That this vacuum of variety that only serves to get us from here to there is finally experiencing an event? Cocooned in concrete walls, blur of boring asphalt, those flash red rectangles, before and behind, wail stop, stop, and stop again. But I can't even see the incident: crane neck, press cheek to window, and see nothing but blocks of farting metal impregnated with blank faces. A crack, a stain - not seen at speed, draws my eye into its dark and seeping rivulets of subterranean gloom, dripping down suspended day into my middle earth fears of what we're lodged below. Barely rolling rubber propels me, inch by inch and I'm still looking for the incident. A death? A crash? A fit of road rage? Or was it just a burst of balloons and honking horns to mark the millionth toll customer crossing the invisible beeping line? Did they thrust cake into the grasping hands of commuters, quick enough to wind windows down? Did balloons deflate and hiss into drains, wrap around some feckless fish far out to sea? Eventual exit into daylight sets me blinking as I flow into traffic's smoother pace and the incident's forgotten.

Kate Maxwell is a teacher and writer from Sydney. She's been published and awarded in many Australian and International literary magazines. Her first poetry anthology, *Never Good at Maths* (IP Press) was published in 2021, and her second anthology will be forthcoming in 2023. Her interests include film, wine, and sleeping.



Fall Back to the Foxholes of Nothingness By James Bradley

Though days of persecution be endless,
Though nature denude you, clown, of your art—
Fall back to the foxholes of nothingness.

The power that restrains Mind is mindless,
Fool, in your upside-down hanging take heart—
Though days of persecution be endless.

Though the river-hewn canyon be cleftless,
At the coming of erosion's upstart—
Fall back to the foxholes of nothingness.

Limp flags from a dead tree hang motionless,
Awaiting the day far-off winds depart—
These days of persecution seem endless.

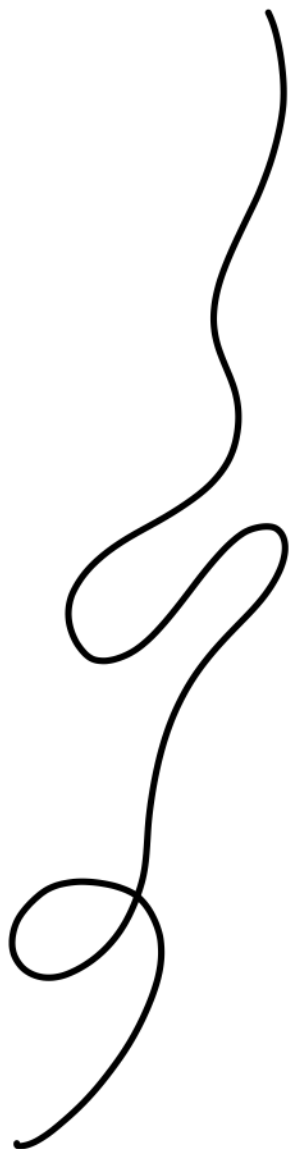
Mind is the law that rejects mindlessness.
Mind's sole doctrine is to Mind's law impart—
Fall back to the foxholes of nothingness.

Through a chink in the chainmail headdress,
The Mindless One pours; how things fall apart!
Though days of persecution be endless,
Fall back to the foxholes of nothingness.

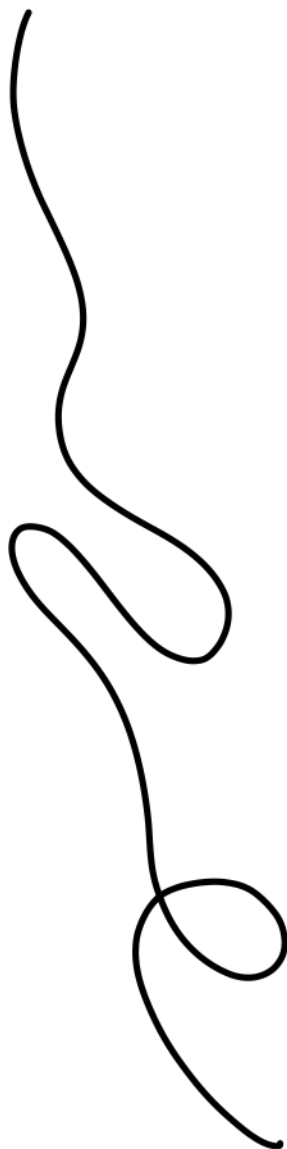


Deliriums

By Mary McCarthy



All teeth and tongue
stain the stolid morning
a still ocean white
as milk lapping
toes half hidden
in swallowing sand
hand me over your
clever heart split
scissoring past teeth
gate finding grave
ground down unbound
bound over and under each
sense replete unsplit
unspelt refelted like
wool fresh from the comb
needled into downsoft
down dander dress
fast in the festival
of flesh and free wheeling
tumble un-dumb down
bottom and belt born words
slipping out from down
under the minds watch
always tick tock chop
a block sawing away
smooth as the ski blade
incising ice ground glass
like teeth ground down
glass spit split
blood on white sand
clean sheets unfolded
furled curled like
fallen leaves un- green
brittle broken brown
shattered dust and crumbs
beyond the clutch
of fists and fingers
reaching up out
outlaws desperadoes
bold taking raking
it all in no apologies
from tongues split or
whole curled up around
those broken traitor
bits of syllable tough
as knots hard pepper
bites biting spice
and sure to please
anyone come to taste
me take me down now
unlucky still delinquent
late unrepentant apologies
dragging me off like
a train to nowhere else.



Please

By Mary McCarthy

Don't patronize
don't tell me there are no rules
when I seem to have broken
most of them, enough to think
it would be wise to post a sign
"Rocks Falling," "No Guard Rails,"

I've kept both fire and laughter
close to hand, could smell
your lies before I saw you
rejoiced in kicking over buckets
of white paint, smashing glass,
defying regulations that kept
things too neat and civilized—

More than once I've been stopped,
locked up, confined, limited
to a small space without air
or sharp objects able to cut
cloth or rope or flesh—
all the signatures of prison
holding me back from breaking
all those nameless rules
I break without thinking, evade
without seeing how they divide
and dismiss me from
your regulated games—

More than once I've been told
I must be avoided
like some dangerous infection
quarantined to protect
the sane from catching
my insanity, tempting in its
freedom from regularity
its crazy spin and shine
bright and sharp as polished knives
glittering with spangles, pulsing
like a strobe light, making
the world stutter—unsafe
for even the most dull
and steady pilgrims
a threat to every honest traveler
my path veering
off the map and into the wild

Spinning too fast to catch
your words of caution
and restraint, drunk
with the glory of my own
fireworks exploding
cinders falling in bright fountains
against the dark

Mary McCarthy is a retired Registered Nurse who has always been a writer. Her work has appeared in many journals and anthologies, including "The Ekphrastic World," edited by Lorette Luzajic, "The Plague Papers," edited by Robbi Nester, and recent issues of Gyroscope, Third Wednesday, Verse Virtual, and Earth's Daughters. She has been a Pushcart and Best of the Net nominee.

My Scheme

By Ben Nardolilli

in your country
I wait
for a response:

“best regards
for more
information”

-if you are
willing to work
together

I am looking
to invest
in real estate-



Ben Nardolilli currently an MFA candidate at Long Island University. His work has appeared in Perigee Magazine, Red Fez, Danse Macabre, The 22 Magazine, Quail Bell Magazine, Elimae, The Northampton Review, Local Train Magazine, The Minetta Review, and Yes Poetry. He blogs at mirrorsponge.blogspot.com and is trying to publish his novels.

Treatment Plan

By Jade Wootton

Shallow breaths in my chest pulse like a hummingbird's wings

So I decide

I am going to walk the same route every morning without my phone

I am going to watch the big brown dog jumping up the tree trying to catch the squirrel

I am going to notice the neighbors that left their Christmas decorations up for months

I am going to remember the cat purring on my chest and the way my little gold earrings camouflage into the little gold bowl on the nightstand

I am going to wonder if CBD peach rings actually do anything or if I just want an excuse to eat candy

I am going to say hi to that acquaintance I barely know because we made eye contact before I could avoid them

I am going to draw directly on a canvas with oil pastels and realize they really do smudge

I am going to take a sexy mirror pic using the pile of shattered glass on the street

I am going to explain to a couple in their forties that orange wine isn't actually made from oranges

I am going to drink a piña colada out of a ziploc bag by the seaside

I am going to transcend, I know it

I am going to remember I am loved now

I am going to drink a sugar free Red Bull and feel my heart beating out of my chest



Jade Wootton is a writer living in Ridgewood, New York via her hometown Los Angeles, California. She is an M.A. candidate in the department of English & American Literature at New York University, where her research focuses on theories of projected selfhood in contemporary autofiction, reality television, and social media. Her work appears in *Electric Literature*, *Pan Pan Press*, *Bad Pony Mag*, *Heavy Feather Review*, and several collaborative zines, including *Playedboy* and *Que Será*. She has read her work in community-oriented spaces such as *Molasses Books*, *Chispa Bar & Cafe* and *Cafe Erzulie*. You can find more of her work on her *Substack*.

run rabbit

By Nathaniel Chew

I am saying it:

this poem is about loss

it will read at a slant—

metaphor for:

social distance
death (duh)
mistranslation
digitalization

not all who wander

diagnosis

the gloaming realization that writing does not happen

out of time

and still



the trouble with deixis:

fat fingers

W. V. Quine on radical translation: the linguist says *gavagai* and means rabbit

the subject says *gavagai* and means *first-rabbit-of-the-warm-waxing-moon*

or *dewlap-yet-undetached-from-rabbit*

or *rabbit-which-means-plenty-and-draws-teeth-from-afar*

or run

and means herself

to escape the subject position

I want to say

subject

is self-conscious word choice

the poet recalling:

colonial science

nominalization

intersubjectivity (George Butte: "subjects are both: a body...and a mirroring of other bodies")

but to say so would be to say

every other word in the poem

is *not* self-conscious

is not also *subject*

(is not also *linguist*)

the trouble with fingers: they're never not pointing

digitalization as metaphor for poem

which would not be *poem* were it able to speak

itself

without world nudging "there" "there"

"consider incompleteness as a verb"
—Anne Carson

"*allez*, talk to you later
—my grandmother who never hangs up after a call

and maybe has a point

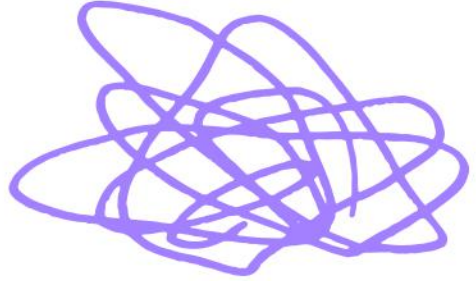
about loss:

as tether
as openending
as precondition for *poeming* her into quotation
sans voice sans sway sans constellation
of all her *losts*
her no longer object positions

consider poem as *lossness*

entropy as tense

a verb both mean and run



Notes

The line attributed to Quine is adapted from his book *Word and Object*, in which he argues for a naturalization of epistemology and for linguistic behaviorism.

The quote attributed to Butte is from his book *I Know That You Know That I Know* on narrating subjects in literature, but also in life.

The quote attributed to Carson is from *Plainwater*. The extended segment goes: "Consider incompleteness as a verb. Every verb has a tense, it must take place in time. Yet there are ways to elude these laws. The Greek verb system includes a tense called 'aorist' (which means 'unbounded' or 'timeless') to capture the aspect of action in which, for example, a man at noon runs directly on top of his own shadow."

The quote attributed to my grandmother is a recurring speech act.

Nathaniel Chew (he/him) is a writer and library human living in Singapore. His collection *featherweight* won the 2019 Golden Point Award for Poetry in English, and his writing is published and forthcoming in anthologies by Gaudy Boy, Longbarrow Press, Math Paper Press, Poetry School, and in *ArtsEquator*, *Pareidolia Literary*, *Practice*, *Research & Tangential Activities*, *Quarterly Literary Review Singapore*, et al.

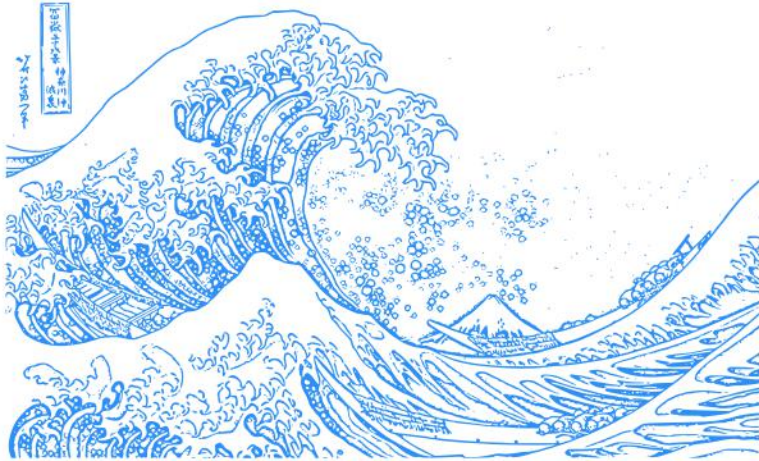
No, or Reflections on California After an Absence of Years

By Lex Kosieradzki

No no no
No no
And a thousand times
No, it is not
The burned grove
Of incense cedar down there
In the valley as far
As the eye can see and
No
It is not
The crashed and burned and
Totally damaged beyond
Recognition Prius there marked
By cones in the ditch
And no
It is not the sentence
"He's actually a preeminent figure
In the NFT art scene."
No
It is
Not the sameness of
The jeans so
Crisp and dark and paired
With a sweater or a
Light jacket wrapping
Every
Thin and graceful body
In the park
And no it is not
The calm and happy tone
With which the number 2,300
Was described as a
"Human" amount of money
To pay in rent.
And no no no
It is not the large drip coffee
Served
In a bowl
Without a handle
To be sipped
With two hands like
Miso soup



And no it is not the sign bolted
To the post below the one prohibiting
Turns both
Left and U
Which said
“Do you really like driving this much?”
And no it is not the sun
And no it is not the sky and
No it is not the sea ever
Closer every year
Or the
(Yet another)
Beautiful day—so many
In a row. No
It is not the ocean of
Pastries and breads
Plumply shining from the windows
Of a thousand independent bakeries
Patisseries and
Boulangeries all delicious
And all identical And no, is not the rule
That all dogs can be unleashed and run
Up to whoever they please,
Whenever they please it and how dare
Anyone disapprove
Here in the land of the free thinkers.



Lex Kosieradzki lives in St. Louis, MO. He plays the saxophone, writes, and runs an art gallery in his house. He likes jazz music, eating, running, and the Mississippi River.

Out of Control

By Selena Cotte

In many ways I am like a bomb
and I do fancy myself the comparison:
What I would give to be as smooth,
curved & dangerous. Don't get me
wrong: I have some ways to go.
I want to be planned like the bomb.
I want precision, scientific execution.
I would never ask you to forgive me for
committing violence for violence's sake.
I only ask that the explosions become
programmed so that I may open (&
close up) at will.

Selena Cotte (she/her) is a poet and
internet scholar living online and/or in
Chicago. She is originally from Orlando,
the Most Magical Place on Earth.

Commute

By Anna Laura Falvey

I stand with the God, rooted
beside me on the subway platform—

As the stage, I smear my face
with mourning grime.
My grinning,

sweet deerhead God licks their thumb
and forefinger and traces a line
of clean down
the bridge of my nose,

and I smell dry ice. I look
to my left, and women are
stepping
through the walls, climbing between
the tracks and they have

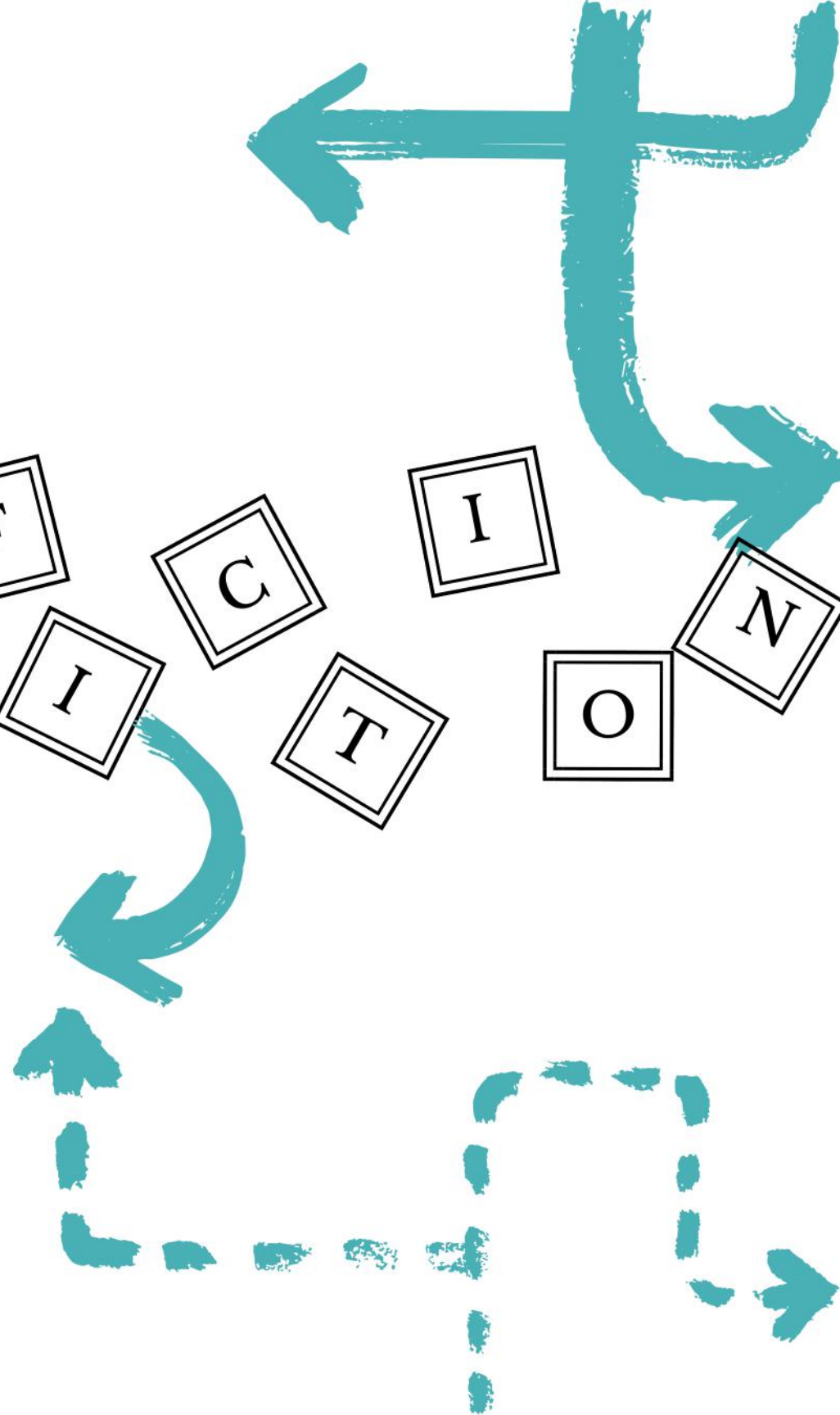
talons
and bright eyes, and are graceful

rippers.
I inch closer to the deerhead—
hold their cold marble hand, feel

talons in my forearm, talons in
my cheek, talons in the soft skin
of my diaphragm,
smiles in my eyes, blind in my fingers,
and a scream
and we are a pool and the underground
is on fire and floating and
the train comes
but we are stronger— we are crawling
we are crushing we are light we are
Joy this is joy this is joy this is joy...

Anna Laura Falvey (she/her) is a Brooklyn-based poet and theater artist. In 2020, she graduated from Bard College with degrees in Classics and Written Arts with specialization in ancient poetry and tragedy. She is currently serving as an ArtistYear Senior Fellow and resident teaching artist, teaching poetry in Queens, NY. Anna Laura has recently performed at The Tank NYC, and her written work has appeared in *Icarus Magazine*, issues 15, 16, 17, & 18 of *Deep Overstock*, and is forthcoming in the inaugural issue of *Ouch! Collective* (November 2022).

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Warm Drives

By Quin Willets

You're stuck on Union Turnpike. The red stoplight glares in the darkness, projecting its authority like rays from the sun.

There are cars in front of you, behind you, and to the right of you, all packed between the white lines painted on the road.

Your left is open; there's no traffic on the other side of the street. It must be nice to drive that way.

Your thought is interrupted; your heart is beating fast because a truck is headed towards you.

The truck's coming from the opposite direction despite the light demanding that it stop; it's hurrying without explanation.

It's so much bigger than your little car.

It honks like you're in its way because you are. It's making its own way. The barrier of white lines won't protect you, their purpose moot.

It bumps over the concrete divider onto the wrong side of the road. Its lights seem to flash as the truck bounces up and down.

You have to move.

You turn your wheel as hard as you can and let go of the brake. You don't know how, but you move over a few feet. It's enough.

The truck straightens out as it accelerates past you driving down on the wrong side of the road. You look in your rearview mirror as it continues on, probably seeking out someone else to smash into.

You feel weak. Your hands are shaking. You want to call your spouse and tell them, "I love you," but you can't, the light's green now. Taking your eyes off the road is the last thing you should do. A car accident after that is a story you don't want to tell.

You shouldn't be this nervous on your way to work.

The Next Day.

You don't want to open your eyes this early, but you have to. You hit snooze for five more minutes, but you know you'll actually get up in twenty. That's gonna cost you.

Your morning routine is succinct. You exercise, take your vitamins, brush your teeth, put your lunch in your bag, and shower. Dressed, you rush to your car. You don't like leaving after six o'clock in the morning. There are too many people on the road like that trucker.

You turn on the heat, it's cold out. People say you're lucky to have your own little compartment, your space. You have your levers, pedals, and your wheel. They tell you that you have a choice. You don't understand what they mean because to them driving is a choice.

But you didn't want to choose this burdensome commute. The train takes double to triple the time. If you walk, you don't have nine hours to spare. What about biking? I forgot how to ride.



You're helpless; driving on the Van Wyck, there's a truck without a trailer. One of its outside wheels is slanted, sparks are firing off of it. You wonder, Is that OK? Can he drive like that?

You decide to ask him or warn him. You try to pull up near his window. But it's too late; your thinking brought you too far away. You stare at him in your rearview mirror, slowing down to tell him. As you watch his wheel fires off from the left side, where you would have been.

The truck makes it to the shoulder where you can't see. The driver's probably calling someone. You assume he's okay and go on; you have to get to work.

What can you do?

You're safe and warm in your car.

A little while later; day, weeks, hours, or sometime before that—you're not sure anymore as everything seems to blend.

It's cold, so you put on the heat and fire up the seat warmers. It's nice to have them; you didn't know a car as old as yours could have had that option, you're lucky.

You forgo Union Turnpike today. You're driving on the Van Wyck with no traffic; how can I be so lucky?

A man is standing on the shoulder outside his car, what you assume is his car. He's on the phone. His car is on fire; the morning darkness is pushed aside. You feel the heat coming out of your vents and wonder if you needed to open them on at all.

You're taking in deep breaths and letting them out slowly; why am I shaking?

You want to help.

But what could you do? You can only hope that it was really that man's car, and he wasn't calling for the person inside.

If this was that kind of story, you'd pull three people out of that car, all unsinged. The sole effect of the fire would have been to burn off the hair from your arms, revealing rippling muscles.

But you have to get to work, and no matter how much you want to, how much you feel the need, you can't do more than that man on the phone.

You go to work and do your job.

Another commute on another morning.

It's even colder today, the Van Wyck is behind you. You left late again; there are too many cars on the road. You say you're worried about traffic making you late, but rocket wheels and fire are what's on your mind.

You drive, and the road opens up for a bit near your exit. With your seat so warm, you drive, noticing the overpasses, one after another after another. The fickle traffic slows you down every so often.

On one overpass you notice the chain link fence and the woman climbing up it. She has a headscarf and a brown Pakistani-style dress. You can't tell if she's smiling or grimacing, but she's climbing a fence over the highway with no way to go but down.



The other side of Belt Parkway is riddled with traffic. You can't get back in time. And besides, what would you do if she did jump? Open your moon roof and catch her? Would you get out of your car like a movie and save her with those hairless arms?

This isn't the story, that kind of story.

You keep driving, make note of the exit number it's closest to, and call the police.

You tell them what you saw and everything you can that you think would help. You wonder if she's squished on the road. You wonder if there are people driving around her knowing there's nothing they can do, thinking there's nothing they can do.

You wonder if you killed her.

You hope the police get there in time. In the parking lot at work, the police call you back and ask you exactly where she was again.

You tell them and hope she just wanted a better view of the highway from up there.

The next few days are silent on the road; the next week is too. You're driving between the lines, always signaling when you need to change lanes,

But

All you can think about are those four days on the road and how helpless you are in your warm, cushioned seats.

You turn up the radio.

It's Friday.

You're on the Belt Parkway; you left early enough today. You're close to work, and all the other cars are just starting to get on the road. Out, a little bit in front of you, where you're speeding up to, three cars drive into each other.

Parts fly off of each of them. All of the cars hit the divider on the right side of the road over the bridge. Even though you're watching, you don't see it; you just see where they land. Thank God they're still on the bridge.

You pull over, get out to help. One man's car isn't a car anymore, the front and rear are missing. His airbags are deployed, with just the middle left, the rest is smashed in. He's taking pictures.

The other two cars are behind him. One is pinning the other to the side of the bridge. You ask the driver in the outside car if she's okay.

She's crying but tells you she is.

The other woman is trapped in her car. Others stop and try to get her out, but they can't. The front door is too warped, and the back is pinned down by the other car. The crying woman tries to move her car, but her wheel fell off, nothing spins as the engine revs.

You and a group of Samaritans pull on the door. It doesn't work.

Now you're trying to push the car without the wheel, but it won't move. You can't get her out.



You call work to tell them you're going to be late and why.

With phone in pocket, you're trying to help but can't.

The police come and say the fire department's on the way; they'll get her out. You wait. Maybe you can do something, anything.

No, you can't.

The fire department comes, you start to walk back to your car. You tell the woman that was crying, "Nobody was hurt, the cars are broken, but that's what insurance is for. I know it's hard now but don't worry, everything'll be okay." You don't wait for a response. You walk back to your car and drive to work.

At work, word got around about what you did, the stopping. Some people are calling you a hero. You tell them you're not but stop short of saying you were helpless.

You sit alone at your desk. You feel a breeze. It makes the hair on your arms stand up. The windows are open, but you don't close them. You don't want to feel warm.

You want to feel the cold.



Quin Willets has been previously published in *Newtown Literary* and *Waterways*. Quin is involved in the field of public education for New York City and has an M.A.

Portrait in Blue

By V.A. Bettencourt

I'm jolted awake by a banging noise and a flashlight beaming into my tent.

"Hello, it's the police, you need to come out," an impatient voice announces.

I stumble out of the tent, heart racing, head still foggy from sleep. "What's the matter?" I murmur.

"Are those your things over there, ma'am?" he asks, pointing to the suitcase and duffel bag next to my tent.

"Yes sir."

"We're responding to a nuisance complaint. I'm sorry but you can't stay here. People don't feel safe," he continues, as a young woman clad in designer jeans and a tailored top walks by at a fast clip, averting her side-glance at me.

A shiver shoots through my veins. "I've nowhere else to go and it's nighttime," I plead.

"I'm sorry ma'am," he sighs. "Look," he says, voice softening, "you can move in the morning but you have to at least clear the junk out tonight, it can't obstruct the sidewalk."

"Junk?" I ask, head spinning. He points to my suitcase and duffel bag.

"It's the best I can do for you. Just make sure you leave first thing in the morning."

I stare at his back as he walks toward his patrol vehicle. Still in a daze, I hide my suitcase as best I can between the back of my tent and the wall, and bring the duffel bag into the tent with me. I don't notice it's unzipped until I hear something shatter. I grab the remains of my mirror. In the glow of street lamp light, I look at the face staring back at me: frizzed gray hair framing a frazzled face, dull eyes — refracting emptiness — ringed by deep fissures of time carved into an ancient face. She looks disgusted at the sight of me. To exorcize her apparition, I dump the shards in a garbage bag.

Fearing what other items may have fallen out, I search my duffel bag, sifting through fragments of a life I once lived. At last I find it, clutch it. If I hold it close enough, long enough, will it feel real? Was it ever? His brown eyes sparkle back at me. They were once so vivid I would get lost in them.

We lived in a house, once. For twenty three years. It had a door we painted blue, bright like the summer sky. We had a little garden out back, where we planted vegetables. Nothing much but it was ours. Or so we thought. We built a life there, once. I had just finished my masters in teaching, and he lit up the night on stages while serving tables during the day so we could make ends meet. He didn't sleep much, back then. Always wondered if that dearth fueled the kernels of his death. But that was before all that. Back then, life made sense.

I remember when we bought this tent. It was 1999 and we got it for our honeymoon at Zion National Park. I say park but that's like calling a saber-toothed tiger a housecat. I had never seen anything like it: jagged cliffs jutting out of the earth in a majestic display of red ochres, beiges and saffrons against an azure sky. We sauntered through canyons sculpted by streams that still ran through them, turquoise water cascading over smooth rocks. I can still feel the coolness on my feet as we waded through ravines. At night, we pitched the tent on pristine meadows and curled into each other under the milky way's gossamer quilt.

My fingertips trace the outline of his face in the photograph. He was a good cuddler, my Jonah. No matter how long his days were, or how tired he was, he'd always wrap me in his arms when he got home, as my lips curled into a smile in the fog of sleep. It was the one constant I could count on. Until I couldn't anymore.

I stroke the pendant dangling from my neck. It is the last valuable thing I own. The last thing I could not bear to pawn. I'll never forget the day he gave it to me: our breakfast in the garden, the fear in his eyes when he got up to get coffee and wobbled as his vision went out. He was down on his knees when I called 911. He still had time back then. Time to learn the measure of time as it collapses into a tight band.

I don't remember how long we were at the hospital, or how many tests they ran. All I remember was feeling as if I was free falling. "Gliosarcoma." "Less than five years." "Surgery and chemo could buy him time" was what we heard. I wrapped my arms around him, fingertips drained of blood, and felt his core convulse as he began to sob.

I lit the fireplace and every candle we had that night, grasping for every flicker of light I could create. "We'll find a way," I proclaimed, more an incantation than a conviction. "Yes," he murmured, stroking my cheek, his eyes anchoring on that moment, the only thing we could count on. We fell asleep on the couch, forehead to forehead, hands interlaced.

The following week, we remortgaged the house we had almost paid off. All I could think of was that we needed to buy him time. And maybe a chance at life. At least for a little while.

The next thirty three months spliced into each other like slivers of a broken dream. His eyes locked with mine, misting as they wheeled him into surgery. My chest heaving as I leaned back against a frigid hospital bathroom stall. A needle puncturing his arm to infuse him with poisons that promised relief. Fifty candles on his birthday cake, a faint flicker of hope for a fifty-first. Water whirling down a porcelain bowl as I held his head as he heaved and vomited. His smile on a late summer afternoon, bathed in the slanted sienna light. His shoulders, once so broad and muscular, withering by the day. His face ashen, cheeks sunken. My stomach coiled as we waited for yet another test result. His fingers strumming his guitar, coaxing melody from measures that ended far too soon. How fragile he felt on the last night I held him in my arms.

There's a strange incongruity in finality that displaces time. Life got out of sync, a tune whose beat splintered from melody. I remember flashes unhinged from structure. The confused look on my students' faces as I stared out the classroom window for moments without measure. Medical bills piling into molehills on the dining room table. Having to let go of his beloved guitar, now a lifeboat to keep me afloat. Ledgers never balancing my lone paycheck against mortgages and molehills. Notices with timelines my mind couldn't process. Sixty days to repossess. A lifetime dispossessed. Friends' hushed whispers and heavy gazes — a tangle of pity and exasperation — at another overstayed welcome.

I curl up with his picture. Memories are funny things. They linger yet slip through your fingers until all you have left are scraps. Do my snippets amount to any less of a life than that of those who believe their lives whole? They never look at me — people with doors they think are their own. Not since I lost my blue door.

V. A. Bettencourt writes poetry and short prose. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Magma Poetry*, *The American Journal of Poetry*, *Burningword Literary Journal* and *West Trestle Review*, among others.





Comatose

By M. Blain-Hartung

Y-E-S.

Holy Mother of Mercy, I've actually pulled it off.

My fingers trembled as I hovered above the pale man, lying prone and completely still. Alive but not living, frozen in a deep coma. A human shell: the skin and bones, sinew and flesh, of what remained from a horrific motor vehicle accident four years past. But no — no, this was no longer quite the truth. That same human shell had just responded.

Is your name Jonathan Clevinger? is what I nearly blurted out. Instead, I caught my tongue and formulated my question with care. It would need to hold up to the inevitable scrutiny of peer-review. My rivals would be circling like hyenas, cackling and frothing at the mouth to rip into such a mistake: the equivalent of 'leading the witness' in a courtroom.

"Can you spell your name please, using the same method." I spoke loud and clear, praying that those words were equipped with coma-piercing armor.

Stale basement air wafted into my nostrils. I had been holding my breath without noticing and my palms had acquired a thin layer of clammy moisture. I forced my eyes away for a moment, having been staring intently at the blinking but stationary cursor. Doubts and fears ran riot and trampled the soft lining of my stomach. Had I simply dreamed the last hour? Were my former colleagues correct? In other words, was I pulling data out of thin air? Pulling it out of a certain other posterior location?

Was Eva right? Was she right to leave?

I stared skywards, urging the blinding nostalgia — savage and unforgiving — to disappear into the fluorescent lights of my dingy laboratory. Red spots began to cloud my vision and bit my lip, urging the caustic brew in my stomach to simmer down.

I ripped tear-filled eyes back to the monitor. The cursor jumped once, before pausing.

J-

Yes, I thought. *Yes, go on. Come on, come on!* I was entirely failing to keep an objective eye on the proceedings. Heartbeats rattled my ribcage like storm-tipped waves slapping against a seawall.

J-O-N.

I closed my eyes in ecstasy, waited for a few moments, and reopened them with dread, half expecting those newest letters to have vanished. J-O-N. I paced in tight circles waiting for further letters to appear. When none surfaced, I climbed back into the musty chair and scooted over to two adjacent computer screens, the squeaking of rusty wheels grating into my temples. One screen displayed vitals and one showed low-res, real-time cranial scans. A quick glance to the left and right screen confirmed that Clevinger's brain activity had returned to basal levels. However, as I scrolled through the raw data from the past minutes, it became evident that several lobes of his brain had been illuminated — a desert sunrise of bright yellow, fluorescent orange, and brilliant red.

I rolled my chair back to the gurney and watched the thin man's ribs arch and fall in a hypnotic rhythm. Apparently, this latest effort had taken its toll on my longest serving patient. Jonathan required rest. Or whatever the equivalent of rest was for a man who has zero voluntary control over his bodily functions. I decided to follow my patient's lead, double-checking each software log and alarm monitor, and shut off the overhead lights. I raised my hand in a farewell wave aimed at the statue in the hospital bed. Until tomorrow, Mr. Jonathan Anthony Clevinger, my ticket back to prominence.

My veins coursed with frantic energy as I parked in the nearly empty lot adjacent to the hospital. I had managed to squeeze in three hours of dream-addled sleep before jerking awake, glistening in anxious sweat and hyperventilating; this was my routine the past six years, like clockwork, body rolling over to the left to hold onto Eva's waist only to grasp the cool cotton of an unoccupied pillow.

It was shaping up to be a glorious spring day here at the Tall Pines Research Hospital, the type of day that crooned for sun-soaked coffee and a hand-rolled cigarette in the arboretum. Instead, I hunched my shoulders against the gray chill of dawn and headed down the flight of stairs to my laboratory facilities. A quick peek at the monitors showed that my patient's brain activity was well within normal range.

Ok Jonny-boy, let's see what magic we can whip up today.

A little prayer popped up in my subconscious, asking for strength from someone who never existed. Not God; never God.

My work in this basement was the accumulation of a decade of work with comatose and function inhibited patients. During those painstaking years, I had pushed the envelope of what the field thought possible. I did what I had to do: pressing, pulling, dismantling dogma, and smashing my head against walls erected by colleagues too timid to make any real damn progress. Yes, I ruffled some feathers. Yes, I'm an abrasive workaholic — there was a simple explanation as to why I was working alone in a basement while others mingled in large research clusters. I *also* knew that these same colleagues were more than content with vanilla, stepwise, boring-as-hell, playing it safe neuroscience.

Or did I just miss her and what could have been? What should have been!

"Good morning, Mr. Clevinger. Once again, I want you to imagine the keyboard. A to Z. Visualize it in your mind, map out each letter clearly. When I ask you the question, simply push each letter firmly. Ok, let's start out simple: can you hear my voice?"

The cursor blinked five times before moving right, three times in succession.

Y-E-S.

I nodded with satisfaction. Before continuing, I ensured that each cranial device was firmly attached to his shallow, smooth skull. In truth, my set-up was simple in design. Sensors measured neuronal activity in several subsections of the brain — in this case, the areas responsible for language, sensory acquisition, and fine motor skills. These sensors fed the resultant data into a machine-learning AI algorithm contained within the mold of a standard keyboard.

My rivals in the field had been dismissive at first, then intimidated, then frightened; in the end, they had arrived back at dismissive, preferring to dive head-first back into the sandpit than admit a true breakthrough. Unfortunately, the larger funding agencies followed their lead; money would only last another few months. But funding would be a problem of the past if I could acquire more data from Clevinger — more proof! Vindication in the form of white letters glaring against a black computer screen.

A tired voice seeped upwards from my brain stem. *She wouldn't have cared if I failed or succeeded. It wouldn't have mattered to her.*

"Very good. What is your mother's name?"

L-I-N-D-A.

Pushing aside inner voices, my eyes now feasted upon the letters with greed, temples pulsating against my eardrums and drowning out the harsh chirping of the equipment. Five letters in under ninety seconds!. He was improving. He was learning. I had been worried that the mental exertion spent visualizing and 'pressing' the keys would lead to early plateaus and cruelly slow transcriptions. I craved speed; I longed for the quantum leap, not to struggle with a toddler.

"Where were you born"

L-A.

Time to crank it up a few notches.

"Do you remember your accident?"

This answer was preceded by a much longer pause. I craned my neck backwards in the chair to glance at the real-time monitor. Highly active in three lobes — not 'resting'.

W-H-A-T-A-C-C-I-D-E-N-T?

Now, this is interesting. A pause of such length would indicate conscious self-reflection. I took a few minutes of my own to ponder. Should I tell him the truth? Should I be merciful? After all, the crash which had left him in this pitiful state had also taken the life of his wife. I chose not to lie, and not to elaborate.

"Automobile accident. You are in a coma, Jonathan."

Although I had not posed a question, I paused nonetheless to allow the man to respond. Regrettably, no response appeared to be forthcoming. In fact, his brain scans indicated a rapid decline in activity, back to basal levels. We had reached the limit for today.

I peeped myself from the chair and wandered up to my second-floor office, ignoring the cold, curious stares of my colleagues. Several hours whizzed by, spent responding to emails and guzzling the center's acrid coffee. Eventually, jittery from alarming levels of caffeine and sleep deprivation, I descended back to Jonathan. Still hovering at basal levels. I opened the communication monitor and jolted backwards, nearly spilling from my chair. Another few words had been typed out, resting beneath the word 'accident'. This sentence, however, had not been prompted by my voice.

H-E-L-P-M-E.

The next week was a flurry of adrenaline, scalding coffee and restless dreams in the shape of a hovering text cursor — dreams which finally pushed away visions of diapers and playgrounds and rushing to soccer practice. Jonathan Clevinger was making fine strides in learning this novel method of communication. His responses became more elaborate, longer and with more depth and complexity.

And more depressing. I did my best to mollify the patient, but at the end of the day, I was the impartial investigator and scribe. The transcriptions began to fill up my notebook with blue ink.

I am very cold.

I am sad.

I want to come out.

Please help me leave this place.

This place. That particular phrase stuck with me between sessions, settling into my own synaptic void. Honestly, I had envisioned Jonathan to be simply experiencing a type of blank mental vacuum: a vacant space where one's thoughts floated beside an ethereal self. But as the days passed and our conversations became more fruitful, I began to reassess this simplistic view. In the margins of my scientific notes, I began to scribble my own interpretations and personal thoughts.

The sky appears as a varying shade of vivid blue, yet it does not change as time passes. —What is 'time' in this plane of existence?

Six bright stars are always visible. The sun continually hovers just above one horizon, with blackness occupying the other horizon. — Not so much a void, but rather a world complete with a true sense of directionality. Endless sunset at one end and endless night covering the other.

Or 'blackness', as Clevinger had repeatedly stated. In several places, scribbled between blocks of data, I asked myself the question: was darkness/night different from 'blackness'? Jonathan never directly answered that question, as if he too was unsure.

Setting aside my notes, I rubbed my raw, puffy eyes. The laboratory was dead quiet from the beeping and whirring of life-support and the absentminded tapping of my pen against the aluminum gurney brace.

Compelled and obsessed, I grabbed the notebook once more and read my own notes.

A sense of time is not evident. He does not experience sunset and impending evening, but rather constant sunlight and the pitch-black of a polar, binary sky.

How did that work? How did that make sense? Was Jonathan frozen in place? No, his dialogue clearly stated the opposite.

I-M-O-V-E-A-R-O-U-N-D. M-U-C-H-T-O-S-E-E.

The concept wreaked havoc within the logical part of my brain, yet I was forced to postulate the existence of an entire physiological pseudo-world of Clevinger's own creation: a world where he roamed over an eternal, paralyzed, timeless plain. And he was trapped.

Again and again, he pleaded for help. At first, I attempted to redirect the questioning to avoid breaking the bad news; I couldn't simply bring him out of the coma. Even with the increased brain activity upon our communication — a breakthrough of its own rights — Jonathan didn't possess the other essential signs which would indicate likely survival outside the comatose state.

As the days flew by, however, I became unsure of even this fact. His vitals *were* improving. Slowly and unevenly, yes, but soon I became more convinced. Communicating with me in this manner — a human firmly based in the real world — was weakening the barrier between us. And thus, was it weakening the barrier between reality and his fantasy coma world?

Still, I hid my conclusions from Jonathan. I didn't want to give the poor man false hope while I was still collecting data. *Right?* That fact that a non-comatose Jonathan Clevinger would terminate my study did not figure into this decision, of course. He had been in a coma for over four years, surely a few more weeks of essential study wouldn't matter in the long run — especially if the data could lead to even more breakthroughs. Think of the consequences for the medical community at large! *Think of the consequences for one man's career...*

N-O-T-A-L-O-N-E.

I sat stunned, fingers painfully gripping the mushy foam of the armrest, reading the line of text repeatedly. My brain rushed to respond, composing several questions, but each lodged itself in the back of my throat. I closed my eyes for a full minute before managing to stutter out,

"What do you mean, you are not alone?"

Silence. Or rather, silence in the form of a stationary cursor.

I had made certain assumptions.

Assumptions. Assumptions. Ass. Out. Of you and me.

My assumption was that Jonathan Clevinger was walking alone in a dreamscape coma world — a world purely of his own creation. He typed of towering trees, standing tall atop rolling hills like statues, bark colored with mottled hues of copper and steel, branches stock still even in the breeze. He talked of winding roads, clear cut against the emerald turf and rocky moors, snaking out in all directions like the tentacle of a giant squid — or of a human neuron. He wrote about shimmering golden grasses — waist high and pillow soft, but brittle to the touch — which crunched underfoot. He told me of the tiny silver and red birds that dive-bombed his head if he walked too fast, equipped with piercing calls far outweighing their mass. Once, he mentioned the still gray waters of a teardrop shaped pond and the lone rowboat which moved unmanned along the shore.

All the while, Jonathan tended to add in phrases like 'what could have been' or 'what never was but could be', the meaning of such words as obfuscated and cloudy as the mysterious lake. But in all those hours, he had never broached the subject of another person wandering the same landscape.

T-W-O-M-E-N.

"Jonathan, where did these men come from?"

I wondered if the tone of my voice resonated into his colorful, bizarre world. I wondered if he could hear the sheer trepidation in my quavering voice.

F-R-O-M-T-H-E-R-O-A-D-S.

Two men traveling on the tendril-like roads, like messengers in an ancient fable. Were these men friends from Jonathan's life?

I-D-O-N-T-K-N-O-W-T-H-E-M.

I rubbed at my eyes again and bit my lip. Clearly, these men were constructs born from Jonathan's subconscious; perhaps they were men sitting across from him on the subway, or ahead of him in line at the cinema.

"Jonathan, what are these men's names?"

A long period of inactivity followed in which I continually monitored his brain activity — still colorful. Finally, the cursor moved again. First name: Steve Morrison.

I shook my head as no connection coalesced in my memory. I squinted my eyes as the cursor moved again. Second name: Darius Johnson.

The floor opened underneath me, and my stomach tumbled end-over-end. Darius Johnson was a patient across town at Holy Cross.

In the coma ward.

I didn't catch up on that much needed sleep over the next few days. Hell, how could I? Too many mysteries to dissect. Too many details slipping through my fingers. What's more, I was becoming increasingly frustrated with the speed of communication. The more often we attempted to converse, the longer he would need to rest. In the end, a flurry of messages would be followed by long periods of 'resting' brain activity. One minute, he would be recounting his attempts to measure time in his world, and the next moment he would vanish like a puff of smoke, leaving behind a blinking cursor and a billion outstanding questions.

Where did he go? Who was with him? What was this concept of 'never was, what could have been'?

The process was exhilarating and exhausting and aggravating and fantastical all at once. I was obsessed. And obsession quickly morphed into paranoia. I avoided my colleagues at all costs now, preferring to scribble handwritten notes and scorning all but the most critical emails.

There would be time to reintegrate into this silly academic world after this study was written. After Jonathan spilled the secrets of this comatose experience. After the mysterious roads of his mind were mapped. After the barriers were breached.

Barriers. Jonathan kept mentioning barriers without elaborating. Not that he didn't try, but I got the feeling he simply didn't know how to explain. Barriers with this world. The blackness as a barrier. How many barriers was he talking about? Were they the same? Where did each barrier lead? He typed about how the barriers were weakening. At first, I assumed this was simply a manifestation of us breaking the communication barrier, but now I was convinced this was not the complete story.

And again and again, the concept of 'what could have been'. Mystery upon mystery.

Speaking of mysteries, the figure of Darius Johnson lingered just outside my mental reach. As far as I could ascertain, the two men had no connection in the real world. Furthermore, a perfunctory search revealed that Steve Morrison, too, was a coma patient at Holy Cross. In the late hours — suffocating and sleepless — I began to contemplate the impossible: Jonathan and Steven and Darius were wandering around — collectively — in a shared existence. In a common...world? Mental construct? On the same damn astral plane?

Jonathan seemed reluctant to talk about these men, as if the presence of others had spooked him. Instead, I gently pressed him on the 'blackness'. The polar opposite of the sunset horizon. The 'black wall' was how he sometimes described it; though I suppose it was not a solid wall, as Jonathan mentioned the presence of bulges in the surface. As if this wall was stretching or bending — warping with every passing day. Although the letters appeared on the screen in the same fashion as all the others, I felt the unease in these words. After only a few questions on this subject, all answers ceased, and Jonathan lapsed back into a prolonged basal resting state.

With an eerie feeling in my chest, I poured deep into the scan data. After a half-hour, I shot from my chair, finally noticing a small detail which had slipped past me before. Directly before our conversation about the 'black wall' had petered out, a clear red and yellow pulse of activity had flared near the amygdala. In plain speech, Jonathan had experienced a bout of intense, primal fear.

The next day, my research took yet another turn. Jonathan had been describing the sensation of his own body and its interaction with the environment.

S-O-C-O-L-D. H-U-R-T-S-M-Y-B-O-N-E-S.

The pen scraped against the notebook. *Patient can feel or perceive pain.* Three minutes pause. Blue ink smeared the edge of the paper and bled into my palms, filling the tiny grooves of my hand. Lifelines — looking like the roads in Jonathan's coma world.

How long would *her* lifelines have been, I wondered? I jerked back to attention as the cursor jumped forward.

M-E-N-C-O-M-I...

I squinted uneasily at the text, shaking out a sore right hand and frantically checking the correlated scans. Attention torn between several tasks, the next words throttled my spine.

W-H-O-I-S-T-H-I-S?

Shaking my head in disbelief, I stuttered out my name without thought. The cursor failed to move for several minutes. My eyes stayed glued to the blinking rectangle, its hypnotic motion lulling me deeper inwards.

D.R.-G-E-T-U-S-O-U-T.

Get us out. *Us?*

Wait, how are they communicating? Who the hell are *they*? What in God's name was going on here?

I swiveled my body around as if looking for help, gazing hopelessly around for answers in the empty, sterile room. I managed to articulate my first question to the prone figure on the gurney.

W-E-H-E-A-R-Y-O-U.

My jaw unhinged like a broken mouse trap. I looked over my shoulder at the scan monitor; Clevinger's brain activity was far above normal levels, spires of color blossoming into view amidst the steady beep of his life support. I breathed a sigh of relief as his brain relaxed back toward a resting state.

What was happening in this room?

In that instant, the steady and slow beeps transformed into piercing alarms. Jonathan began to hyperventilate, chest heaving and fingers twitching as if clutching an electric fence. I watched in horror as his fingers clenched into fists, then relaxed, then clenched again harder, hands turning ghostly white.

Oh no.

A seizure rippled through his body in a wave, feet kicking underneath the blanket as if fighting off an attacker. I looked at Jonathan's contorted face in time to spot a rivulet of crimson trickling from his left nostril and pool at the corner of his chapped lips.

Oh no, oh crap, oh no, oh crap.

Jonathan arched upwards — head and neck cresting in a wicked backbend — before collapsing. Helpless, I watched as his brain activity plummeted to dangerously low levels, before plateauing, and eventually rising toward basal levels. One half hour after the incident, his vitals were stable but concerning: breathing erratic, heart rate and blood pressure steady but low.

Finally daring to take my eyes away from the scans, I peeled my sweaty back from the chair and gulped in several deep breaths. During the entire episode, I had kept my back to the communication monitor, afraid of what I might find. Chiding myself for being a poor scientist, I pinched the bridge of my nose, and swung around to face the screen. Dread flowed down my throat like rancid oil.

*The barriers are melting. All of them. Breaking through.
Please help us. The barriers are nearly gone.
I think they are coming.
Through the black. The never was.
Get us out.
The barriers are breached. They are coming for us.
Get us out.
Get us out.
Doctor, get us out.
Get us*

.....

The silent cursor blinked on and on.

I pulled Jonathan Clevinger out of the coma the next day. Yes, it was ethically the correct decision, but in fact, there was no other choice. The man had not responded to repeated attempts at communication and his once steady vitals began to slide. On the other hand, his brain activity was peeking past what was considered comatose levels. It presented a paradox — an interesting medical puzzle if I hadn't been so rattled — in which he would surely die *unless* removed from the coma. I tried my best to document the process, but mostly I simply worked with shaky hands and prayed to Gods I didn't believe in.

Jonathan woke up in the ICU ward three floors above my laboratory. The man was groggy and sedated. He blinked in mechanical intervals, eyes struggling to adjust to the fluorescent lighting, mouth opening and shutting without uttering a sound. Like a goldfish out of its bowl, I thought caustically. All in all, Jonathan Clevinger looked terrified. When the other doctors had left the room, he fixed me with a piercing gaze.

"The barriers, they are crumbling. Coming down — that's what the people said, the people who had been there a long time. The dissolution was beginning. Everyone was running about along the trails," he whispered, his voice raw and quiet, and he paused to gather his breath.

"They said...they said that they are coming back to us, from all sides. From over the black wall."

He gulped down a sip of water and coughed. "I thought you pulled me out in time...but I'm not so sure. I think someone is here with me. From...before, from what wasn't to be."

"Jonathan, what does that mean?"

But his mouth opened and closed wordlessly again, and his head fell back onto the pillow. Sleep, not a coma. I wondered what he dreamt of; did he return to the land of the comatose or was he finally able to wander his dreams in peace?

I tramped back down the stairs toward my filthy office and paced up and down, filling, drinking, and setting down multiple cups of coffee until the phone rang. My feet smacked on the tile floor as I crossed the room and yanked the phone from its holder.

"Richards, you got a second?"

The voice on the line belonged to Don Tabor, head of the coma ward at Holy Cross. We didn't get along; he thought of me as a crackpot charlatan, and I believed him to be a jaded old bag of wind.

"Listen, we just had a crazy night in the ward. Seven out of eight patients suddenly seized and crashed, brain activity flaring and then flatlining - and I'm talking about patients who have been in a stable coma for years. Unfortunately, we were only able to pull one out of the coma."

I held my hand over my mouth for a moment before expressing my faux surprise, mind racing and chest bound tight.

"Anyways, the patient...hell, I don't know how to phrase this — he is asking for you. Richards, have you met Darius Johnson before?"

I grabbed my coat and keys and slammed my shoulder into the exit door.

"I can recognize your voice, Doc. Nice to meet you, I suppose."

Darius Johnson was a slender, dark skinned man with graying temples and clear brown eyes. The eyes expressed a myriad of emotions as they looked up into mine.

"They are with me now, Doc. They breached that black wall...they...they wanted to finally live."

His eyes rolled slightly back in the sockets and his chest heaved. Darius was in rough shape, vitals weak and the left side of his body was paralyzed. His voice was deep and resonant, but weak, and I had to bend down to hear his words.

"Mr. Johnson, how exactly did you hear me in your coma? I was speaking to another man, so how – Who –"

And then I realized something in that moment: I didn't understand my own line of questioning. When Darius spoke again, the tone was eerily different. Bold, level, and clear. Oddly old-fashioned, as if coming from a past generation.

"Is that him? The doctor who broke through?"

I jerked away from Darius' face in surprise. Although nearly imperceptible, I spotted the man bob his head up and down in response to his own question. My lips froze, mid-gape.

"We give you our gratitude. Having waited for eternity and more, stuck wading through the endless dunes of time and chance, we nevertheless awaited the foretold breach. To finally cross over. To finally exist. Waiting for the wall to crack."

A pause. Darius spoke with yet another tone, this one soft and smooth, lilting and lightly accented.

"Ah so this is it, the promised land. It's beautiful. Much too bright, but beautiful."

I finally found my voice, though it left my lips as a frightened hiss.

"Where have you been? Who are you?"

The same smooth tone answered — still in the deep voice of Darius Johnson but so clearly not Darius Johnson. "Ah, here she is. Someone has been eager to meet you, to see with true eyes."

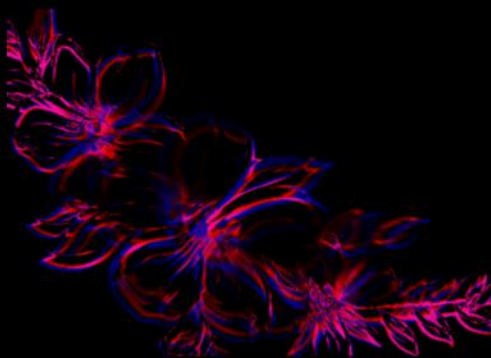
The next voice reminded me of a cold pillow, and of an empty dresser, and of tear-filled green eyes, and of a car door slamming shut. This voice was sweet and shy and a little raspy, the voice of a young girl — a girl who I knew instinctively was six years and forty-three days old.

"Hey Dad."

I remember mere glimpses of my exit from the hospital. Only vague shouts of surprise from the staff, sneakers squeaking on slick floors, and the clatter of the stairwell door. When I came to, I was in the middle of the courtyard, underneath the central cherry tree. The fragrance brought me back to reality; the air was gently perfumed and flitted in and out of my nostrils.

Eva had adored this smell. My wife would come out to the tree, waiting — *why did I always keep her waiting* — for me to finish rounds. Waiting with that friendly bump of her tummy pointed skywards, looking at the blossoms as they swayed in the wind. Talking to her girl, describing the unrivaled majesty of pink blossoms against a blue sky, promising to press silky pedals against tiny satin-smooth hands. This very same cherry tree now reminded me of how the tree branches didn't sway in Jonathan's comatose world; how there, the trees stood perfectly still even as all else descended to unthinkable chaos.

An errant breeze rattled the tree and a blossom cascaded lazily down to land on the curve of my neck. The flower was surely the touch of someone who I loved but could not love, the fingertips of a girl who never was but who never left, never for a minute, even when Eva was several years gone, carried off to California on the floodwaters of grief. I picked up the flower and inhaled, and everything flooded in, all barriers long gone.



M is a Berlin based molecular biologist/biochemist. The author of many scientific manuscripts, M has recently veered into the fictional realm. Several of his short stories are due to be published, debuting before the year's end. Visit his website at: <https://mblainhartung.wixsite.com/my-site-1>.

No daisy, no grass

By Lucie Culerrier



I was leaving Japan soon. Something in my bones was telling me it was time. The meals had started to taste sour. The sunrises felt shorter and fainter. My feet longed for familiarity and rest. I had become too acquainted with Tokyo's intricate streets. Each neighborhood so different from the other that my initial surprise and discovery had now made me overwhelmed with choice. I decided to go south before leaving. My mind was made. I would visit Hiroshima.

The air feels different here, heavier, thicker. The people are different too. The tourists quieter, the locals louder. The city wants you to come. It wants you to see. What remains is proof of its indestructibility. Its eternalness.

I leave my room so early that I feel nauseous like I have been ripped out of my slumberous bliss and my blood is still pouring on the floor. My steps are heavy, and my thoughts discombobulate. The same words keep resonating over and over in my head, a relentless chorus that will not let go of me. Whispers of nature, of rejection and cities. It's something someone told me, but I can't see where or when. I just know that these words bear the distinct scent of the mixture between cigarettes and mints, and that they say:

"Of course, Nature rejected you. The essence of nature is to reject men. That is why men create cities to hide in. We are all hiding from our initial rejection."

Monday the 6th of August 1945. Early morning. After sunrise. The freshness of the morning dew still lingers. The Little Boy bomb is dropped on Hiroshima. It falls for 44.4 seconds before exploding.

I remember learning the dates, the number of victims, the following bombing in class. So many killed, so many destroyed. I remember my B-. The comment above my grade read "Good but incomplete." Incomplete? Incomplete. I didn't really understand, did I? I still don't. Even now, as I am looking at it.

I hate history classes. I fear violence. Everything here reminds me of both. But now I am here. I walk around the city. I see the temples, the red arch, the gardens. I have a map. I have a plan. I feel a strange vibration when I'm pacing down the street.

A pulse.

The city is alive.

And it leads me to you.

Genbaku.

Hiroshima Prefectural Industrial Promotion Hall, a tall, respected beacon of architecture.

Now you're one of the many victims and survivors of Little Boy. Half-torn up, still standing. Protected by your stone and your steel. When I think of survivors, I don't picture you. I imagine old wrinkly hands, eyes that have seen too much, quivering lips. Not you.

I don't understand, but I want to know. I look around me for those pamphlets or signs with more dates, more words, more languages. There is none. No explanation or details of what happened. You know we know. And for the few who don't, you just stare at them, the same way you are staring at me now, in your profound silence. There is no need for an explanation.

Behind me, there are people who have walked past this building every day for the past years and who don't even notice you anymore. They walk with purpose, without paying attention to you or to the group of tourists that wraps around you. An elderly couple is sitting on a bench with their backs turned. They are looking at the river. I copy them and watch the water glisten under a ray of sunlight. The stream gently dances for the Sun, overjoyed to be basked in its warmth. The elderly couple is holding hands, his thumb softly caressing her fingers. This sight makes me want to rip out my eyes and offer them to you, so you may see what all of us see beyond the reach of your roots. How peaceful a Monday morning can be.

I look at you again. You're taller, much taller than me. Older as well. You've been standing for decades, if not centuries. I burned my finger on a cigarette years ago. I still have the scar. Sometimes, I look at it and can almost feel the pain again. I can almost smell the burning flesh. But not you. When the fire came, you let it devour your entrails, but the beast couldn't destroy your bones. Your exposed steel frame and glassless windows are both your body and your wounds.

I'm so sorry.

I walk across the other side; I want to study you from every angle. I tiptoe around to see what is left inside. Everything, gone. Empty, of course, but I still need to check. I am looking for something. At home, the buildings bombed during the war have been overtaken by nature now. Overflowed with weeds, bushes, and peace. Cobblestone under the moss. Inexorability overpowered by freedom. I want to see that here. But when I look for a daisy or some grass, all I can see is the grey concrete that was once the underlayer of your foundation.

No daisy, no grass. Maybe one day, when I'm gone.

Genbaku? Will you stay when I finally leave? When we all do? Will you stand the way I couldn't and hold the memories in your walls? The memories of death and the memories of peace? The memories of loss, the memories of grief? Will you stay for us, or will you collapse under the weight that we put on your shoulders?

If men create cities to hide, why do they destroy them? To reveal what's beneath the surface? To revoke the privilege of protection? To face our true nature?

I do not know. But Genbaku does.



My name is Lucie Culerrier, and I am a 22-year-old writer. I am a postgraduate student at the University of Cambridge pursuing a master's degree in Creative Writing. I have previously been published in *Swim Press*, an independent literary journal, for a piece of flash fiction. I spend my time between England and my native France, unable to choose between the English countryside and my precious Parisian cat Lili. I am passionate about all forms of storytelling, from novels to films to video games. I hope to publish a novel one day.



The Good It

By Bryana Lorenzo

My friend Stacy once asked why I feared the bad boy - the rebel without a cause who took a drag of a cigarette in the school parking lot. Why I feared the bruises and the burn scars. Why I feared a project. Stacy asked how I could ever fall in love with a beautiful boy if I couldn't withstand tragedy. My friend wanted a beautiful boy, needed one so much she took AP Psychology just to understand the neurons of his brain. My friend asked when I'd fall for my beautiful tragedy.

"Why should I fall for anyone when I already have you?" I asked.

My friend giggled. "That's just the thing! You won't!"

My friend was the good girl - good plain nails, good straight-blond curls tied up in a ponytail, good grades. She could hum and a hummingbird would stop to listen. She could scream and the town would know a slasher was on the loose, because monsters always went for the good girls first. The demure girls who helped the injured men on the side of the road. The sweet girls who could mend a broken mind while breaking their own bones.

What was I? I waltzed around in black lipstick and too-short black hair and dark overcoats and stained-white tank tops stolen off clothes lines. Broken homes. Broken windows. Breaking into cars just to steal a knock-off iPod. I was the daughter of what rebels left behind. Broken ribs. Broken families. Broken, staring off into space when Stacy asked me to go study at her place.

I didn't think there was anything else. I thought I wouldn't have anyone when Stacy was led astray by her pretty little tragedy. Then, one night, we snuck into a college party together, through her beautiful tragedy's beautifully tragic older brother. And I drank a bottle of brandy laced with sugar and NyQuil and nearly collapsed on the front steps of the college dorm. Stacy would then pipe in that if I'd found my bad boy, he'd take me home in the back of his car, put me to bed on his couch. But I was all alone, because my friend was nowhere to be seen. I felt eyes on me, all over me, crawling over my body, under my clothes. I stumbled outside, onto the cold pavement. Strange men - strange *things* crawled closer to me. I tried pulling myself across the lawn, determined to squirm all the way home if I had to.

Then I met *it*.

The Good It.

Shadow subsumed *It* - an inky black mass that was part cat, part child raised by wolves, and part veteran of a long-forgotten war. *It* didn't have a name, didn't know its own face, only felt the ridges and the boughs of its human form. *It* only truly knew the alleyways and back roads and broken boulevards it traveled, under silent starlight and moon glow. But it saw me, knew me and didn't know me, took my hand in its own and led me through darkness, like a child of the wilds leading an unsuspecting adult into the fray. And it took me home, its hand a light breeze against my frostbitten fingers.

"What are you?" I asked.

It didn't respond, and, for a second, I thought it couldn't. Then, it sighed.

"You're asking a dangerous question there," *It* said.

The Good It disappeared into the ether. I felt bad naming it *The Good It* at all, because I doubted it wanted to be named. I wondered if it skittered off to pick up other drunk girls, other of the vulnerable, the good-but-damned girls for whom danger was a sin. Would *It* take them home too? Come out of hiding and lead them in darkness, from the watch of wicked ones? I couldn't speculate for long, because, after about a minute, I passed out on my front porch.

Stacy asked the next day if I'd met my tragedy yet. If I knew how I'd die, and who I'd die for loving too hard and being loved too violently. And I told her about *It*. The Good *It* that led me home. But The Good *It* couldn't be a beautiful tragedy or a forbidden romance if I couldn't see its face, couldn't feel its skin press against mine. Because how could its lips graze against mine? How could I feel its pulse in its beating chest? How could violence erupt out of something so soft? So ghost-like?

"What's love if not a little danger? A little pain?" she asked.

"You never pain me. Are you saying I don't love you?"

Stacy giggled and shook her head "Of course I pain you! Just look at your face whenever I talk about my boyfriend!"

As we spoke, I saw it. *The Good It* stood in the shade, no less obscured by twisting light than in the night. *It* wasn't watching me. In fact, *it* looked right through me, left and right, up and down. Only in cloud cover and only when all heads were turned did it dare leave the shade. At least, *it* thought it left unwatched, because my eyes were locked on it, a curious gaze following its path. My friend slapped me on the back of the head when she realized I'd zoned out.

"C'mon! At least try and pretend you don't find my lecture boring!"

"I don't find it boring," I said. "I find it so terrifying that my brain has to zone out for its own protection."

Stacy rolled her eyes. I refixed my gaze on *The Good It*.

That day, I followed *It* home. I didn't intend to. I just wanted to talk to it, thank it, ask it questions like why it hangs out around college dormitories saving strange girls from being taken in the night by strange men.

But it seemed to always speed up at my approach; thus, I ended up running after *It*, but it ran faster and escaped me. So I fell to the pavement and begged, begged to the heavens to just let me speak with it. Silence. Stillness. Breeze passed through strands of my hair. I gazed at where it once was, at the shade of tall trees that lined the lawns of the neighborhood. I saw nothing. I almost left.

But eventually *The Good It* hesitantly emerged.

"One question," *It* said.

My brain nulled. Finally, I took a breath and asked, "Why *it*?"

It sighed and shrugged "An *it* is safer than a *who* or a *what*."

A good girl was leading a man on to be nice, but wouldn't go out with him. And a good girl wasn't very good if she couldn't pick his brain and rewire it with mechanical precision. And if a good girl went on the run, she might be watched and caught. And the good people of society - male or female - watched and said nothing. A good *it*, *The Good It* explained, was not just safer but more moral than a *who* or a *what*. *It* ascended above a mere *who* or *what*.

When I got home that evening, I called Stacy on the landline, asking how I'd know if I was in love. Her giggle was like a birdsong ringing across my bedroom walls. Love was fear. Love was grace. Love was passionate and all over the place. So then I asked what it meant to feel null, numb, nothing inside towards everything but two people—longing for one, longing for answers from the other? What did it mean that I wanted to fix someone, mend their bruises, blow away their pain while asking somebody else how to do all three of those things?

Stacy gasped. "You're... you're in love! And you want me to give you advice!"

I scratched my neck. "No... I feel like you're close but... off the mark somehow..."

"Who are you in love with then?" Stacy asked.

I went to answer, when my cheeks suddenly reddened, and I hung up the phone in panic.

Later that week on a Friday night, I went to another party, though not one that Stacy's beautiful tragedy got us into. He'd made her eyes black after he accused her of cheating on him. With *me*. She wanted to unwind with stolen moonshine on a beautiful lakefront property at some jock's house whose parents were probably in the middle of a divorce due to his dad's affair with the too-young secretary. When she was good and drunk, I asked if she'd finally break up with her boyfriend. She giggled and said something about not being done with the interior yet. And not fixing the wall plaster or the chipping paint. I went to drink outside. Pretended to be tipsier than I was. Watched. Waited. *The Good It* appeared.

It didn't leave when it realized I wasn't as drunk as it thought it was. Instead it stayed, gave me room to truly hammer myself to oblivion with a watchful eye on my back. I thanked *The Good It* for the space and safety of inebriation. So I drank—downed more and more and more. And then I asked what lips tasted like. If they really tasted like cherries. If my friend's lip gloss still tasted like cherries, because it did in middle school when I stole it from her purse and poured it on my tongue. Then I started coughing from all the alcohol and so *The Good It* patted me on the back, then answered my question, seemingly out of pity.

"Saliva and dirt and ash," *It* said. "That's what others taste like to me."

I snorted. "Well... that doesn't seem the nicest."

"Oh. I forgot. It also feels like a punch in the gut."

"Damn!" I hollered, spilling the last of my drink. "You want a beer?"

"No thanks," *It* said. "I can't keep another person safe by not staying sober."

I asked *The Good It* about its home life. *It* was raised by rodents—rabbits, rats, and raccoons. *It* knew how to run, knew how to steal away in the night with a bite that could be its last for a week. *It* was once a pet in a bird cage until it ran off - couldn't stand picking at the brain of its overseer until he finally decided to be nicer, couldn't bear bearing sympathy when all its sympathy lied toward the other girls, the good girls, the ones like caged birds in dark rooms with small, covered windows. I asked *The Good It* if that made it a beautiful tragedy. *It*

said it didn't feel very tragic, just on edge. So I asked what made a beautiful tragedy then, and what made love? Who needed sympathy, an angel-dove?

"Maybe you're looking in the wrong places," *The Good It* said.

"Well, what's the right place?"

The Good It sighed. "Someone you feel safe with, and who you want to feel safe with you. Someone you love. Someone good."

"That all sounds like Stacy!" I said chuckling.

But *The Good It* didn't laugh. "Looks like you found your answer then."

I shook my head. "She's taken," I said glumly. "With a monster, yes, but—"

"Well, sounds to me she perfectly fits the bill of 'tragic' then!"

The Good It led me inside, led me to the room Stacy was failing to cry herself asleep in. With its help, I lifted her up off the covers and dragged her home, though she clawed that she wanted to stay, despite the spiked punch and the loud noise and the fact that someone had dropped a Molly in her drink and we didn't know who or where they were. I said if she really wanted to get away so badly she should just come home with me. So she did.

Before *The Good It* left, it took me aside while Stacy slept.

"Why do you love her?" *It* asked.

I shrugged. "I mean... who wouldn't love their best friend?"

"Why is she your best friend?"

I paused. "Well... she makes me feel happy... and safe... and I want the same for her."

"Good luck on the latter," *The Good It* said. "Based on what you've said tonight, I doubt she even remembers what safety feels like, or that it's something you can long for."

The Good It left for the last time. For good. And I was left with only myself, with my sallow skin and torn jeans and messy, mopy hair. Stacy once asked why I feared a bad boy when I was such a rough and tumble bad girl, when I once broke a kid's nose for feeling me up in math class or once stole a bottle of gin from the principal's office. If anyone could handle one, it was me.

But then again, she never saw the burn scars on my shoulder I covered up with my jacket, or the busted-through screen door that my father punched in a drunken rage. She was too much of a good girl to spar with those problems, a sweet girl, a pretty lovely smart girl, who tutored me in Spanish on the weekends and once even sold a lock of her hair to a creep who smelled like feet all to help me pay my home's utility bill. Oh, what would a good girl know about a bad girl know about a bad boy know about a *good it*?

The next day, Stacy asked when I would fall in love with my beautiful tragedy, because clearly she was having so much fun. And I said I was looking right at her. Because what could be more tragic than a tragedy falling for tragedy? What could be more romantic or more grim? What could be better than the good girl falling for the bad girl on the advice of a mysterious *it* out skulking in the wilderness?

"What do you think?" I asked, laughing myself mad. "How about we fall in love, run away, start a new life together, and die smoking cigars in a moldy motel?"

Stacy blinked several times, wondering if somehow this was her fault, if her advice had finally made me snap, or if I'd taken a swig of whatever was in that spiked punch. A small smile seemed to almost escape her lips, but she smothered it. She lurched closer, but still said nothing. Her lips were so close that I could smell her cherry lip gloss. She curled a finger through my hair and stared into me. The silence was louder than the music outside.

"I... I think you're crazy," Stacy sputtered out eventually. I couldn't tell if she said it with any measure of sincerity, longing, desperation, or concern. I felt it must have been all four at once, since she gave me the same look I gave her each time I saw her. I smirked and pressed my lips to hers. She didn't pull away.



Pushcart Prize and Best of Net nominee Bryana Lorenzo has had her fiction featured in *Outlander Zine*, *The Graveyard Zine*, *Rhodora Magazine*, *Le Château Magazine*, *The Literary Canteen*, *Pile Press*, *Agapanthus Collective*, *Novus Literary Arts Journal*, *io Lit*, *The Talon Review*, and *White Wall Review*, and has fiction forthcoming in *Occulum Journal* and *Birdie Zine*. She's also an alumni of the prestigious *Adroit Journal* Summer Mentorship and the *Iowa Young Writers Studio*.

The Old Mansion

By Anita Ronchini

*and what i want to know is
how do you like your blue-eyed boy
Mister Death*
Buffalo Bill's, E.E. Cummings

He was panting as he walked his bike along the steep path leading to the dilapidated mansion at the top of the hills. The black bike was his father's, who bought it shortly after Marcus's birth. Riding with his father was one of his favorite childhood memories. During their summer outings, they often visited the old mansion. If he concentrated hard enough, he could still smell the rich scent of the fig tree that had grown in one of the building's rooms. Some of its branches, heavy with fruits, hung out the rusty window bars. They would pick the ripest figs and eat them sitting on a nearby bench, their fingers sticky with sweet juice. One time he ate too many and got sick on the way home.

Now the bike was rusty, and its brakes were so rigid that he had to press the levers with all his strength if he wanted to slow down. His left foot slipped on the rotting leaves that covered the narrow path and he lost his balance for a brief moment. The warm October weather was followed by weeks of incessant November rain that dulled the woods' bright autumn colors. Once colorful, the fallen leaves had turned brown and black after the rain. The air was so humid that Marcus had trouble breathing. His sweaty shirt clung to his back and his hair was drenched under the woolen cap. The first multicolored Christmas lights were blinking on windows and balconies, and his father had been dead for almost six months. A few days before the trip to the ruins he had noticed that his recollection of his father's voice was slowly starting to fade away into nothingness, like a pianissimo at the end of a concerto. He wondered how much time it would take for the memory to pass into oblivion.

In the last months of his father's life, as he watched the once strong body become frail and thin, he had often tried to picture grief. During this morbid looking ahead, he had never glimpsed beyond the funeral as he expected it to be the pinnacle of his imagined pain. He had not yet known that grief is not a linear, orderly place. He had not known that he would be walking at the edge of chaos, a region suspended in a fragile dialectical interplay between order and disorder, known and unknown. In his teenage years, the concept of meaninglessness had often attracted him. He had found a secret delight in flirting with the Dionysian pull toward an orgiastic annihilation. He had often listened to the alluring siren's song calling him toward a sweet nothingness. But he had always recoiled in horror when confronted with glimpses of the void waiting for him, for he had desperately clung to the illusion that life is built on harmony and reason. His seemingly daring escapades at the fringes of order had the only goal of testing the strength of his control. He had never been brave enough to embark on a catabasis to the orgiastic realm of Dionysus.

Now, months after his father's death, Marcus knew that he had misconstrued the nature of grief. It occurred to him that all the well-meaning, inspiring clichés were false.

"Time is the best medicine."

"Time cures everything."

In reality, grief turned out to be a place ruled by entropy, where pain grows exponentially and the void is unending.



Stopping to open his wind jacket, Marcus realized that he had walked past the fig tree and turned his bike around. Lately, these episodes of absent-mindedness occurred more often. When he managed to snap out of them, he would often find himself in a place without recollection of how he got there. In an effort to find some stability he had started writing a journal, but he quickly found himself unable to make order of his tangled thoughts. In the past, he found solace in writing. Now, however, putting words on paper was an exhausting task. Sometimes it took him a full day to jot down a couple of sentences that he later could not make sense of. The meaninglessness of the void left by his father's absence had turned his thoughts into a succession of disjointed memories and undefinable feelings.

The bike ride to the old mansion was an attempt to fill the void. His father had loved the derelict building so much that he would often bike there to paint or draw. In the first weeks after his father's death, Marcus had tried to find his presence in the countless paintings left behind.

"An artist never disappears completely, for he can always be found in his art," his art history teacher once said. He liked the concept at the time, but now all he could find in his father's paintings was the never-ending absence. They were lifeless, meaningless, voiceless canvases on a wall. When a journalist came to the house to photograph his father's studio for a brief obituary in the local newspaper, he found speaking about his father's art tasteless and blasphemous.

"Before making a big decision, I always ask my late mother for advice," said a relative during a rare family gathering. The phrase had impressed him then. Now the act of speaking for the dead made him feel like a sacrilegious impostor, a grave robber. For imagining what his father would say meant breaking the laws of the realm of Hades.

Leaving the fig tree behind, Marcus finally reached the spot where his father used to paint during the long summer days. He found a nearby bench covered in moss and sat down. The building's facade hadn't changed much since the last time he saw it. The yellow paint had almost completely peeled off the wall. The concrete doric columns adorning the grand entrance were covered with rust and moss. The rain had blackened the wooden shutters that were now starting to rot. But the roof had yet to collapse. He had found that old ruins tend to evoke melancholy. He once saw a woman burst into tears upon entering the Roman Forum.

"Why is the lady crying?" he asked his mother.

"Because it reminds her that we're not here to stay." He nodded, but he was too young to understand. Even when he became acquainted with the concept of death and loss, he still failed to grasp why people grew silent and uneasy in front of old ruins. While these testaments of past lives reminded others of their caducity, he found derelict buildings calming and comforting. He'd always felt a deep sense of belonging among them. For him they were the only barriers left to prevent ever-looming destruction and decay. *These fragments I have shored against my ruins.*

As he sat watching the barren tree branches slowly disappear into the fog that was emerging from the surrounding woods, it occurred to him that the mansion behind him was the only tangible evidence of the border between the living and the dead. In the exact moment his father crossed that border, he became forever lost to him, for death is infinite otherness. Marcus sat on the bench for a long time, waiting for the rising fog to engulf him. When the mist finally hid him from the world, he admitted to himself for the first time his unwillingness to move on from grief, for it was the only place where he was able to feel a feeble connection with his father. It could sense him at times, looming in the periphery of his vision. He knew that looking directly at it would cause its disappearance. Yet, how could he find the strength to move forward? How could he commit this ultimate betrayal?

Anita Ronchini is a writer living in Italy.

Courage Anniversary

By Amita Basu



I stroll down the promenade and onto the bridge. This one is closed to automobiles. Between its dead-gray embankments, the river glows noon-gold. I've seen the river at its source: young, leaping motion-mad. Here, near its mouth, matured into inertia, the river drifts. Over the river, past me this balmy June Sunday, people jog, stroll, power-walk, and bicycle. Dog-walkers discipline the curiosity out of their dogs with smart little leash tugs. Old couples, combining constitutionals with treat-shopping, have finally found all the time in the world.

The breeze river-cooled, body-warmed runs through my hair. The rankness of strange bodies, cologne-masked, teases, faintly repels my nostrils. So many possibilities.

A flash of fluorescence. A woman, with a beagle, is running toward me in lycra lime-green. No, not lime-green. Citron. (Astrid taught me: she, who saw all the colors.)

Lady Citron nears me, looks at me, and slows. My heart quickens. She looks away and runs on. I gaze after her, my heart reluctantly resettling. I shake her off, brighten my face, and drift onward, waiting for someone else to find me.

The world is full of women seeking a project. Let other men chest-thump about skirt-chasing conquests. They don't know the intoxication of being found.

Two years ago today, Astrid picked me out of just such a crowd.

###

The flame in her eyes drew me, mothlike.

'I'm chasing my star, Pleo,' she announced, hours after we met. 'Want to live with me while you chase your own?'

'Yes, please.' Can you refuse someone who offers to pull you up?

Astrid's 'star' was to become a cellist for the Concerts Colonne symphony orchestra. 'I practice,' she said, 'Then I rest, to let my fingers callus. Rinse and repeat. And you, Pleo? What star are you chasing?'

She called your dreams 'stars' – but only if you were a true dreamer. She was one, so she fancied she could spot another. I was happy to play along. At first, I thought it was just play.

'My star is to become our generation's great character-actor.'

I watched her practicing, trying to decide what was more unlovely: a cello's figure or its voice. 'Tell me,' I asked Astrid, a few weeks after moving in, 'Why cello?'

'I loved the piano. But my hands stayed narrow. So the master suggested cello.' She giggled as if, in reducing her life to an accidental rhyme, she'd reduced it to nothing that could obstruct her future.

'Why not just keep trying piano?'

'I could, Pleo. But I'd only ever be mediocre at it. The master said the cello is, for me, where greatness likeliest lies. So here we are. March-march.' Again she laughed at herself. A desperate little non-laugh. I realized she was serious.

I'd always wanted to be a great – something. Perhaps Astrid was the partner I'd been waiting for. So I got busy playing character-actor, acting star-chaser.

###

The flame in Astrid's eyes was, I discovered, a spirit implacable. Keeping her working, motion-mad. Keeping her living in the castles in her head: where greatness was everything, where merely existing was nothing.

I like music okay. Astrid played one phrase from a Beethoven sonata forty-three times, I counted one evening, before running out for air. I'd heard nothing wrong with Iteration #1. She joined me outside. Fingers raw, eyes far away and placid from dreaming all day. 'Sorry, Pleo. I know the repetition gets on the nerves. But – practice makes perfect!' Another little laugh.

It wasn't the repetition that irked me. It was living with her drive, feigning my own. For that's all my drive had come to: fakery. Perhaps if she wasn't so ridiculously driven, or if her drive had found success, that might've pulled me up.

I sidled up to her on the balcony, searching her eyes, thinking, as I'd begun to, that I should leave her. But I never could decide whether for her sake or my own. Is it a privilege or a curse to be loved by an obsessive? Don't tell me it's both. Both is boring.

Astrid straightened my collar, her hot, rough fingertips barely brushing my throat. 'Shall we hike to our patisserie? A break will help my music.'

It wasn't just music that possessed her. So did everything. I was born here, and she only moved here for work. But Paris has become my city through the nightlong jaunts on which she led me. She visited her parents every weekend and traveled cross-country to old friends every month. She wept when their pets died, and celebrated their babies and promotions without any bitterness that she, in her star-chasing, had been left behind in earthly achievements. To chase her star had been her choice. Now she accepted the consequences – this, I imagined, explained the curious complacency toward other people that coexisted with her desperate ambition. This complacency I grudgingly admired.

Materially, our lives weren't hard to accept. We'd inherited enough from aunts to live on for a decade: modestly, with occasional treats.

At the patisserie that evening we encountered her former colleague. He'd just made partner. He invited us to the celebration. 'And in October you must come to our wedding,' he added. I glanced at his companion: barely twenty, svelte, pregnant. As the couple strode away toward their big shiny car, I watched Astrid's face. It softened. She was no weeper: but I thought she'd confess, at last, that she did feel left behind.

'How little it takes to make the earth-dwellers happy!' she reflected, scraping the coffee froth from her almost-empty cup. 'God bless'em.' With a child's sincerity, licking her lips, she put away her coffee stirrer. So this was the secret of her complacency: she imagined her star-chasing, successful or not, made her already superior.

On our way home, Astrid halted at the top of a street, mesmerized by the sunset. A cloudless, colorless sunset, occluded by concrete buildings slouching shoulder-to-shoulder. Eyes big and wet, she beseeched me: 'Isn't life wonderful?'

She really thought it was. That's why she had to become wonderful, too: to earn life. Great cellist – or nothing. On her way to her star, she enjoyed sightseeing the Earth; but for her, there could be no permanent contentment here.

Astrid's love for life was the heat I tasted between her breasts. We'd been lovers for months. Still, every time, I lingered at foreplay, postponing moving lower. For you may dream as high as you please, but reality unflinchingly falls away from under your feet.

The total vulnerability of her all-or-nothing attitude made her a splendid lover. But my addiction to her wasn't sexual. I kept thinking I should leave, but I couldn't decide whether I wanted to. I'd been playing at acting a while. But, with her there grinding away, I, too, had begun to dream. It was like living with the Olympics motto: I wanted to jeer, and I wanted to become who she thought I was.

So I stayed put.

###

The Concerts Colonne rejected Astrid the seventh year in a row, and requested her not to apply again. It was unfair to other candidates.

Astrid said thank you, came home, and began planning her suicide. She'd spent her days playing. She spent her days now identifying drugs, pharmacies, and doses.

I could've stopped her, got her straitjacketed. But Astrid wasn't mad. Madness, to her, would've been resigning herself to an earthbound existence. She'd failed to catch her star, so now calmly she graduated to the next item on her to-do list.

'You know,' I improvised. 'I'm stuck, too. Haven't had an audition in months. People don't appreciate real acting anymore. Theater is dominated by trend-chasers seeking only spectacle.' She was still looking at me, suspending judgment, waiting to be convinced. I pulled out my trump card. 'Astrid, I'll go with you.'

Astrid's flaming eyes looked into my soul seeking profundities, finding what she wanted to, looking blindly past the excuses and pretenses that constitute the lives of the undecided. 'I knew you were one of us. I knew it when I picked you out.'

Her arrogance was vast and sincere. That made it easy for me.

You don't blame me, do you?

Do I blame myself? I've been going back and forth. Long before I met her, Astrid was ambitious and talentless, resolved that her life was worth living only on certain terms. Who was I to tell her otherwise? She'd failed to pull me up. She'd failed to pull herself up. She'd pulled me along this far.

One year ago today, Astrid found courage.

On her sunshine-yellow linoleum, she made two little pill piles. One for her and one for me. Mostly opiates. This woman who'd lived in fire chose a death that was a sinking into oblivion. No brief agony of cyanide for Astrid.



I could've faked, taking no pills at all. But I enjoy adventures, so I took enough to leave my death up to chance. But when Astrid passed out, I found myself crawling to the kitchen, downing half a jug of spoiled milk. I threw up. Not enough. I finished the jug and finished emptying my insides. Who knew I could be so driven? If only this urgency could invigorate me in everyday life. Then I wouldn't need women to pull me up.

I crawled back to our living room. Astrid had entered her final stupor. I snaked into her cooling hand, my hand hot from nausea, sweaty with shame.

Her parents demanded a postmortem. One day she'd been living an industrious, consistent, full life. The next day she'd killed herself. Had she been terminally ill? Or had her brain been scrambled? The postmortem found no abnormalities. They who think existing is gift enough failed to strip Astrid's death of its meaning.

I kept to myself my own attempt and my presence at Astrid's death. She had left a note: 'Please don't look for anyone to blame. I just don't want to be here anymore. So I'm going.'

###

It's Astrid who'd drawn me. But it's Astrid who burned up. She proved both flame and moth. From the flames of my flirtation with death I was carried away, unscorched, in the arms of a new, secret mistress, who Astrid, in her final act of love, bequeathed to me.

All this year, warming my lonely bed, this mistress has curled under my sheets, nudging my knees, distinguishing me with her favors. My flirtation with death is the secret mistress that makes me special. So I thought.

A year on, my mistress has deserted my bed. Again alone, as the afternoon pales, and the crowd on the promenade thickens, I grow cold.

I expected that almost dying would be a moment of truth to galvanize my life forever. That's why I told Astrid I would join her on her way out. Awakening now from my yearlong fling, I see that my flirtation with death has changed nothing. Neither do I cling to a creaturely existence, nor can I commit myself to chasing my star. Does almost dying ever reform a man? Perhaps that's only another tragic myth.

You and I have outgrown tragedy. For us, now, only the farce of stillborn suicide attempts.

I couldn't find the courage to die. Can I find the courage to live? Like the river, here at its mouth, I drift on the stream of maybe later.

I heard the doctors on television say chemical pollution has broken our dopamine systems. There's an epidemic of suicide attempts, bone-sapping half-heartedness, and fatal ennui. You know what that means: don't bother trying to fix yourself. If you're broken in the same way as everyone else, are you broken?

So, strolling down the promenade bright-faced, I wait for another woman, seeking a project, to draw me. To pull me out of this drifting. A spot of star-chasing will wake me up.

Isn't there something in between? With a sincerity I inherited from Astrid I envy those to whom the middle path is open.

###

The runner in the citron lycra, towing the beagle, has circled back around. Down this bridge, down through the south side of the park, up that bridge, up through the north side of the park, and back up this bridge.

Again, as she nears me, the runner slows down. Again our eyes meet. Now she smiles. She looks ordinary, but so did Astrid. You have to study these dreamers to see the tension of ambition stiffening them at odd moments, their clear eyes glazing over with blindness to Earth's pleasures and trials.

The runner's smile wavers, assesses, and matures into confidence. Women quickly see that I'm no threat. We introduce ourselves. Pleo. Ilya.

'Coffee?' offers Ilya.

I shrug. Her eyes glimmer. She likes this. Making up her mind, since I'm undecided. Leading me, since I'm willing. Willing to be pulled up into inspiration. Willing to be pulled along into another adventure.

So, uphill, my new flame marches her beagle and me. I've been found again.





Re:birth

By Amita Basu



All day I've struggled not to remember *that* day, but my cramp has been building, and I sit clutching my belly. I confront my dinner, seeking the culprit: another thing to eliminate.

My coffee's decaf. (Decaf is safest *after* heart surgery, so I'm hoping it'll help *prevent* heart surgery.) No dairy. (When I was five, I had diarrhea after a pint of ice-cream: I might be lactose-intolerant.) White bread-and-vegan-mayo sandwiches. (Grandma has high cholesterol.)

Nothing left to eliminate: everything that could hurt me is already gone.

All day I've kept my eyes on my work, but now they steal towards where Aurora's portrait used to hang. We got an old-fashioned studio portrait on her first birthday. Afterwards, I was desperately relieved to have one more thing to hold on to. But it became one more thorn in my heart: so the portrait's gone, leaving behind its spot on the wall.

Microwave explosion!

I stare at the telly. I've muted it: less scary so. A microwave has exploded in a Munich flat. "This was probably an accident," says the reporter in subtitle, "Though police are considering arson..." The resident had a vengeful ex-boyfriend, who's been spotted lurking in the neighbourhood. Fortunately, the resident was dispatched on a last-minute work trip last night. "The property damage is minimal, though the noise frightened neighbours..."

My throat clamps closed. Forcing it open, with swallows of sugar-free milk-free caffeine-free coffee, I absorb the news. Munich's just 6,000km away. What if Savazios had blown up *my* microwave? Aurora's death wasn't my fault, but he blamed me: I saw it in his eyes.

Time to lock away my microwave. Why have I deferred this? Grandpa warned us about microwaves. He was prescient. Splashed across every newspaper, now, is: *Cancer!* I confront my Sunday dinner. Yes: I'll make do with cold sandwiches and cold-stirred decaf every day. Hot food today isn't worth the risk of being blown up tomorrow. I unplug my microwave-oven. I'll eBay it later; for now, I haul it out of sight: to the storeroom, formerly Savazios's office.

It's a small room; it's been a long three years. I nudge the door half-open. Photo frames, anniversary-gifts, and rocks and twigs picked off the forest floor on weekend walks half-spill out. (We didn't call our walks 'hikes' or 'forest bathing' – that was hipster, and we felt smug together, resisting fads. But our smugness was airy: it left room for laughter and fresh air.) I thrust the microwave-oven into the clutter. I relock the storeroom-door, and slump against it, massaging my belly.

I'm used to grief cramps – what the doctors call psychosomatic symptomatology. Now I get them only on significant dates. I've locked away the calendars, but my gut masochistically marks time.

Today's cramp is worse. It's sapped my self-control: I've allowed myself to say their names. I swore not to do this to myself. Someday I'll confront the past. Meanwhile, it's only sensible to lock away the things that can cripple me. Microwaves and photo frames. From my cardigan-pocket, I dry-swallow another paracetamol. Tomorrow I'll awake cramp-free and memory-free. I heave myself up and clear away my half-eaten dinner.

I finish my assignment: blueprints for Manchester's first pagoda. I sign my name: Anna Rossi. I seal the blueprints in an envelope. I can't face leaving the flat today. I'll nip down to the lobby early tomorrow, when only the guard's nodding, under his cap, over his desk.

I was an architect. Good enough that when I became housebound, they let me draft from home. *I am* an architect. I can still see a few buildings through my windows, and as many buildings as I want in the books I get delivered to my lobby.

Time for bedtime checks. Windows: now opened a chink (don't want to suffocate); opened no more. (Last December, in Tours, a pigeon flew through a window into a flat, couldn't fly out again, shit and flapped all over, terrified, and terrorised the old couple, one of whom then had a heart attack.) Rubbish-bin, lidded and lifted for the night onto the counter. (Yesterday, in the lift, a resident told her great-grandson there'd been rats on her honeymoon ocean-liner in 1923.) Rat-traps: set. Radiators: not leaking. Power-sockets: not afire.

Bedtime. I spend the first half of the night drifting in and out of nightmares. They're abating: now, when I awaken, I remember them for a half-second – then they're gone.

Sleepless, I run checks a few more times. There's not much left, now, to check.

###

Past midnight, I awake, gasping. My gut feels ready to slip out my backside. Convulsions sit me up, then double me over. Even gasping hurts. *Is it my gut?* I've eaten nothing unusual. Nor does this feel like grief cramps.

Suddenly it's here, and I'm on my feet. I realise what this is. Arms clutching abdomen, I stumble to the bathroom. My head swims. How can it be? Savazios left weeks after Aurora died. I've been alone three years.

In the bathroom, I lower my pyjama shorts. With a final convulsion my body ejects something. I feel it in my pants: a puddle, slimy soft. Well, I know what to do. This time, I didn't know I was pregnant; I can't possibly be, yet here we are. I perch on the bathtub's edge and plant my feet, knees apart. I ease my pants down around my knees. In a puddle of mucous and blood – swim two mites of flesh: hairless, obscenely nude, squirming.

What have I given birth to? Another monstrosity. Panic cramps my larynx. Vividly I see myself fleeing the scene. That's what I should've done three years ago: fled this flat, where only guilt lives, bashing its head against the empty walls.

I massage my larynx. Gently I lower my pants to the white tiles. I squat. I peer. The mites of flesh are two creatures, each about an inch long. Their skin is a transparent sac: taut over pink-and-black innards, sealing in the black dots that represent eyes and ears. I know what I've had. Rats.

Does their skin seal in their mouths, too? How will they eat? I offer a fingertip. Breath, tiny but warm, scopes me; then two tiny mouths nudge my fingertip, and toothless gums nibble me. So: the sacs don't seal the mouths. They can eat.

I withdraw my hand. I must make this decision rationally. Undecided, I squat and stare. My cramp disappeared the moment I ejected these things. I could flush them down the toilet, incinerate my pants – and, tomorrow, resume normal life. I didn't ask for any of this. I am not guilty.

My hand's found its way over to the mites again. They nose blindly around my fingertip, seeking a teat. They whine.

If I were thinking, I'd be again overcome with revulsion, paralysed. I'm no longer thinking. I scoop them up in a white terry hand-towel, clean them up as best I can – they're tiny and I'm afraid of squishing them – and carry them in the palm of my hand to the fridge.

Here's the milk-carton. (I still keep milk: in case a starving streetcat sneaks through the window-chink, and only a milk-offering can save me from her wrath.) In my palm the two morsels wriggle, rearranging themselves, seeking the warmest crannies. They're cold. I must heat the milk.

I reopen the storeroom. The microwave-oven topples into my arms. I microwave the milk, one second at a time. I remember: it must be warm, not hot. I'm not used to microwaving a thimbleful of milk. But I remember to check the temperature with my elbow.

My babies love to sniff!

I've set them down right at the saucer: still they sniff blindly around, wriggling away; it's sniffing that brings them wriggling back to the saucer. They sniff while they drink. They knead the saucer, as if it were rat-teats they must knead to release milk. Sniffing, snorting, they get milk-soaked. All through this they're fully-blind, half-asleep. After their meal I swaddle them in a fresh hand-towel, tucking it around them, their noses unobstructed.

Again I confront the storeroom-door. For three years I've been half-opening the door, shoving things in. Now I need to step inside. I thrust the door open. Things spill out. I kick them back in. Then, remembering, I kneel, pick them up, fight my way in, and lay down further inside the things that've toppled out. Here's Muncher's crate.

Muncher died peacefully at 21, after a short illness: he felt no pain, and I felt no surprise. Still his loss, treading on the heels of the others, overwhelmed me. I vowed: no more pets.

I dust Muncher's crate, bed down inside it, my babies towel-swaddled, and lock the door. I've never raised rat-babies: better safe than sorry. Dog-crate by my pillow, feeding-alarms set for every half-hour, I go to bed. Perhaps this is just another nightmare.

I half-hope it isn't. I've been clinging to what my life has become. Now I see what my life had become.

The alarm awakens me. I'd fallen asleep! Fully asleep. I lie, in the darkness, waiting for the nightmares to recede. Looks like this time I wasn't having any. Through the grill I check my babies. Under my two forefingers, two tiny heartbeats race.



###



All week, my babies' bodies stay pink-skinned, their eyes and ears skin-sealed. All day I watch them: sleeping, feeding, whining, squirming. Checking again for abnormalities, I run my finger down their tiny bodies, palpating with their heartbeats impossibly fast – but normal, Google reassures me. Their bones are spongy as cartilage. Again I count their appendages: four toes, plus one ankle-hoof. Tiny toes, whittled by microscopic elves.

Skilled elves: my babies are perfect and there's nothing wrong with them.

Under the translucent skin-sacs, their facial features grow. Then they protrude. Into the smooth eye-sockets protrude rubbery black raisins. From either side of the skull protrude tiny rosebuds. Their eyes and ears are coming.

I tried putting my babies in the kitchen, in the sun, while I worked: but I kept nipping around to pore over them. So now I keep them by me. I peep at them every minute – but my work's getting done, too. Details over which I'd vacillated for hours now fall into place. How I was ever so silly as to agonise over trivia? I carry them around, even on bathroom-breaks, tucked into my cardigan pockets, lined with paper napkins. This phase – I remember – won't last: this blind, deaf, total dependence.

They mustn't suffocate. So, at night, instead of closing the windows to a chink, now I leave them half-open.

The eighth morning, my final feeding-alarm awakens me from a sleep still nightmare-free, but awakens me to panic. Across our bed, the sun's rays fall aslant on something sick-shiny. My babies have wriggled, out of towel and crate, up against my calf. But what's wrong with them? Why do they lie unmoving where Aurora lay that morning? My heart is preemptively bursting, preparing me for tragedy. But, this time my resolve is steeling me to deal with it. Nobody knows about my rat-babies. If they've died, again for no fault of my own, I shall flush them down the toilet. Nobody will know and look at me with different eyes.

I sit up and fumble at them. My eyes adjust to the sun in them. Now I see. Fur!

It's just fur, that they've begun growing: still thin and colourless, but already lustrous. That's all the sick-shine was. Laughing, I clutch my babies to my bosom. They wriggle and squirm. Flush my babies down the toilet, indeed! I hear the hysteria in my laugh; only now that the terror has passed do I feel it shaking me. My hysteria ebbs, leaving only soft relief.

At two weeks old, their eyes open: black and sleepy. Their ears pop free of their skulls and nestle, still flat, in their fur. The fur's gray now, but still just a dusting, just shielding their raw pink nudity. Baby fur, softer than safety.

Three weeks. I run my finger down their backs, neck to tail. They're as long as my index finger. Springy muscles, and bones no longer spongy, resist my finger now. Life is growing up and against. But they're still babies: they whine with pleasure, and squirm into my fingertip massage.

I watch them constantly; still, again, their next metamorphosis happens overnight. I bid my half-nude mites goodnight, and awaken to find them in fur coats, big and fancy. They've been playing Castle between the crenellations of my toes. Hearing me laugh, they come scurrying, nosing my lips, welcoming me to their new day, unself-conscious of their new beauty.

At four weeks old, the dull gray of their infant fur differentiates into their adult colours. One baby is mostly cocoa, the other wheat. I've binned all my rat-traps, covered up the ankle-length electric outlets, and if there'd been things lying around on the floor to take up, I'd have taken them up. Now I give Cocoa and Wheatie the run of the flat. Hither and thither they scurry and scamper: whiskers quivering, pink noses glistening.

Always, their globe-trotting expeditions terminate at the Bermuda Triangle: the storeroom-door. They rear up: forepaws hanging, fore-wrists lax. They turn on me black eyes glistening, begging. I open the storeroom-door – but don't let them in. If they got in amongst my life's rubbish, I'd never find them again.

I go in alone to retrieve toys for my babies. The books I bought after my losses. Books on trauma, grief, and healing. Cocoa shreds them into ribbons.

I retrieve Muncher's toys. To a rubber chew-ball, textured, tennis-ball-sized, Wheatie clings two-handed, like a drunken pilot, whiskers wriggling like Medusa's snake hair. Heart in mouth, I watch her. What if she topples backwards and gets steamrolled by the tennis-ball? But, dancing awkwardly, she stays aloft.

They fish out a fountain-pen from the calligraphy set I gave Savazios on our first anniversary. Savazios never filled the pens: he'd always wanted to try calligraphy, but even with a set he never got around to it. And he took nothing with him when he left: not even his clothes. He had the right idea: walk away from everything. When did I appoint myself museum-curator of our lives?



"I'm the world's worst museum-curator," I confess to Cocoa, scratching her neck with the pristine gold empty nib. "Exhibits all tossed away in the backroom, unlabelled." Cocoa's got an idiosyncratic pleasure-point right of centre from where her skull meets her torso; a brief scratch here has saved me many reward-pellets during training. As I scratch, Cocoa's eyes close, hoarding the privacy of her pleasure. Her right hindleg windmills: she thinks she's scratching herself.

I laugh. When will she outgrow her silliness? Muncher never did. Affection surging, I squeeze Cocoa. Her jaws close on my forefinger. Playfully, pressureless – but lightning-fast. My babies' non-humanness astonishes me.

Also astonishing: I've remembered what to do.

I thought I'd forgotten. I thought forgetting was my only hope.

###

On hindlegs, Wheatie spends hours peering out the balcony-door, which I've kept locked since the prank.

A harmless prank; but, coming when it did, it did me in. First, we lost Aurora, weeks before her second birthday. She'd been born with a unique heart defect: the doctors had given her two years. Savazios and I blamed one another when she was born. Not in words: but, for us, there were no more walks-not-hikes. I awoke one morning to find Aurora, as usual, in our bed – she was always crawling out of her special crib into our bed – but that morning she hadn't made it past my calf. After the first shock of grief, Savazios and I again blamed one another, again not in words.

Then Savazios left. Then Muncher died. Then, one morning, alone in the flat, I awoke, shivering in the draught, to find the balcony-door ajar, and a sticky note on the glass: I took a plastic spork from your takeaway in the trash sorry I was dared to climb up here and take something and your door won't close from the outside sorry.

I opened the balcony-door, leaned over – we're on the third storey – and retreated, shut the balcony-door, had a lock installed that evening – and it's been locked since. For it was after the prank – which shouldn't've mattered at all, which I should've laughed at – that I finally heard the universe shouting at me: 'Enough. Life is not for you.'

Now I watch Wheatie watching the world through the glass. I prostrate myself behind her, wondering what she can see. She promptly abandons her studies and climbs into my hair. I give her a hand to battle. She's as big as an adult, with the energy of a teenager. She roughs up my hand; I sit up and cease play. Acknowledging my that's-too-much signal, she sits back at once: but her whole body quivers, pleading. She darts back to the balcony-door, standing again, peering out, now scratching the glass. Cocoa, distracted from her mid-afternoon treasure-hunt under the bed, joins her.

They're nine weeks old. For six weeks, I've wondered: Should I open the balcony-door? I've made a series of concessions. I've let them root in the rubbish-bin: there's never anything spoiled or sharp in there. I've let them in the bathtub: they seem immune to drowning. But, about the balcony-door, I've vacillated.

Back at work across the drawing-room, I watch my babies still scratching at the balcony-door. Fully grown, but noses still pink, quivering with the moist curiosity of babes fearing no tomorrow. Have I the right to fear, for them, what they don't fear for themselves?

Scratching the glass, they look like they're running. Running nowhere, trapped here with me.

If I were thinking, I'd be again vacillating, paralysed. I'm no longer thinking. I cross the drawing-room. Hands clasping balcony-door-handle, I brace myself. Do Cocoa and Wheatie know what door-handles are for, or is it my stance that cues them in? They jump onto my socked and slippers feet: meerkat-standing, sniffing the door-crack. Craning their necks up at ridiculous angles, they beseech me with galaxy-bright black eyes.

Open!

Air rushes from the world across the balcony into me. I stumble out and steady myself, hands on banister. With slow forceful breaths I massage my gut out of its clench. The breeze stirs on my face: sun-warmed, autumn-sharp, bursting with smells red, blue and yellow. My senses overwhelmed, I close my eyes and slow my breath.

Cautious, quivering, my nose sniffs the world's scrambled smell-rainbow, picking out memories. Honey-roasted peanuts. Wine. Leaf-fire, smouldering.

I used to be able to identify leaves by their smell. After the flames envelop them, they all smell the same: but when they're just smoking they smell different. Hickory. Chestnut. Oak. Had I known I'd be hibernating for three years, I would've hoarded these smells for my long winter.

I open my eyes. The sky's too blue: I can't face it yet. I peer below. The vendor across the street is hawking honey-roasted peanuts in paper cups, and mulled wine in styrofoam cups.

'Mulled.' 'Styrofoam.' Out here is the world, still. In my head are the names for things, still. The tide surges up my throat. Joy, that it's all still here. Sorrow, that I've wasted three years of it. Joy and sorrow compete in my throat, threatening to choke me.

Squeals at my feet half-awaken me. Stunned by memories and the world, unthinking, I shut the balcony-door behind my babies, who've scurried away.

Motionless above my head, now in my face, a wingspan wavers, blotting, briefly, the afternoon sun's indolent gold. A falcon lands on my banister, a foot away from me. Fully awake now, I look him in his golden eyes. His wings fold away and under. He regards my babies, safe behind glass, and turns on me, eyes fire-bright, ice-cold.

I stand paralysed, waiting for panic to rush me into action. A microwave-oven exploded 6,000km away? Quick, lock away my own. I lost a foetus, then lost a baby, then lost my husband? Quick, lock myself away. I wait for my panic; but instead, up my throat rises something else. I recognise it when I hear it.

Laughter. Not hysterical, this time. Raucous.

The falcon starts, flaps a bit, then steadies himself and glares. I laugh harder, clutching my stomach: but my stomach is all loose now, loose with laughter. There's nothing to hold onto: and that's alright, for there's nothing to hold in anymore.

I wipe my eyes and clap my hands. "Boo!"

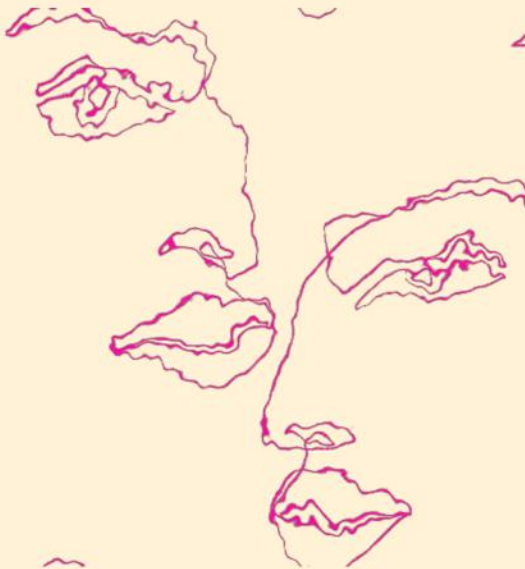
The falcon flies away.

I reopen the balcony-door. My babies scamper back into the wine-drunk sunshine, and huddle against my ankles. "So, my explorers, is that the end of your intrepidity? You'll stay near me, now, eh?" They will, but perhaps not forever. And that's alright.

It wasn't my fault. Birthing a sick child. Losing her. Losing my husband. Losing Muncher. Getting pranked. None of it was my fault. But neither was it the world's. So why, to punish the world, did I lock myself away?

The instructions the universe shouted at me three years ago were right: for three years ago. My rat-babies have been whispering to me the words for tomorrow. As the tears fill my eyes, refusing to fall, I laugh at my own folly. The tide that was surging up my throat, threatening to choke me – ebbs, dissipated by my laughter. Leaving only soft froth. Leaving, in grief's wake, rebirth.

My first life was terrifying. So would this second life be, if I were alone. Thank god my babies are with me.



Amita Basu's fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in over forty magazines and anthologies including The Penn Review, The Dalhousie Review, Mid-Atlantic Review, The Bombay Literary Magazine, and Gasher. She lives in Bangalore, has a PhD in cognitive science, teaches undergraduate psychology, likes Captain Planet, and blogs at <http://amitabasu.com/>.



N O N

F I C T I O N



Don't Throw Me the Nuclear Football

By Jim Ross

In response to Ukraine's valiant resistance, Western intervention, and the expansion of NATO, Putin has repeatedly threatened nuclear escalation. His army has fired upon and taken over Zaporizhzhia — the largest nuclear facility in Europe — restored its power, and abandoned it, leaking radiation. The Russian army has also taken over Chernobyl, which has revved up fears of nuclear accidents like Fukushima and Chernobyl itself.

Closer to home, after Trump lost his re-election bid, even his closest advisors feared he might launch an unprovoked nuclear attack against an unidentified target to justify declaring Martial Law and upending the peaceful transfer of power. Then on January 6th 2021, as Vice President Pence attempted to oversee the counting of electoral votes amid chants outside of "Hang Mike Pence," a Secret Service agent accompanying him clung to the nuclear football - an emergency briefcase for use by the President to launch a nuclear attack while away from fixed command centers. Moreover, during this transitional period, outgoing President Trump was evidently shipping top secret nuclear documents to Mar-a-Lago.

Vitriolic muscle-flexing and threatening to use nuclear weapons has been on display intermittently over the years to intimidate, and demand submission. Throughout its invasion of Ukraine, Russia has repeatedly threatened to use nuclear weapons to push back against Western support of Ukraine. But is there any realistic prospect of a nuclear accident or of the codes falling into the wrong hands? Yes. I speak from experience.

During the presidency of peanut farmer Jimmy Carter, my wife Ginger and I lived in an apartment in the Kalorama area of Northwest DC. A block away, at the corner of Kalorama and Connecticut, the closely-guarded Chancery of the People's Republic of China (an Embassy starting in 1979) occupied two historic apartment buildings joined by an inner space. The Chancery overlooked the Rock Creek gorge from the southwest terminus of Connecticut Avenue Bridge, the world's largest unreinforced concrete structure. Completed in 1907, the majestically arched, classic revival bridge was distinguished by two cast-concrete lion "guards" at either end; two with eyes closed, apparently sleeping, and two with heads tilted upwards and mouths slightly open. Twenty-four bronze lamp posts, spaced equidistant along both sides of the bridge, provided discernable illumination after dark.

Almost daily, Ginger and I cross the bridge on foot to enjoy the expansive view of the Rock Creek gorge below and the surrounding forested hills and trails. We often jog across to challenge the 15-station parcourse at its northwest base. Sometimes I dash across for solo jungle runs through the National Zoo to its north. One day, coming home from a jungle run, as I walk down our gingko-shaded street, I see a tan leather briefcase smack in the middle of our intersection, sun-dazzled. I look around to see if somebody might be coming back, but see no one. I snatch it, tote it up two flights to our apartment, and lay it down on our vintage 1930's porcelain kitchen table.

"Look what the cat dragged in!" I brag, still out of breath.

"Don't open it. You don't know what's in there," Ginger shouts, as I open it in search of an ID. I assume its owner is as worried as I'd be in his shoes. I want to return it pronto. But once I open it, my heart starts racing like a trapped deer's.

"Those look like maps of where to find the secret treasure in King Tut's tomb," Ginger says.

In fact, the briefcase contains detailed diagrams of the innards of the Los Alamos nuclear weapons complex. Each is stamped in big red block letters 'TOP SECRET.' An itinerary details an imminent visit to Los Alamos by a newly-elected U.S. Senator from Maine and his entourage.

I keep searching and find the ID for the briefcase's owner, a legislative aide for said U.S. Senator. I call the home number on the ID. When I hear a man answer, I ask point blank, "Do you know where your briefcase is?"

"In the study, on my desk," he replies without flinching.

I say, "Why don't you go check."

Moments later he returns to the phone, breathless. "Who is this? And what have you done with my briefcase."

"I have it here," I say. "I found it in the middle of the intersection of 20th and Kalorama. I want to return it."

Relieved, he says, "We just had a baby. I was so focused on getting the baby into the car, I guess I forgot the briefcase. I didn't even realize."

He guesses? Didn't even realize? What was he thinking, bringing home highly-classified documents that in the wrong hands could trash national security?

I give my address to the careless carrier of nuclear secrets. We agree on a time. I tell him I'll hang out in the lobby and be on the lookout.

"Since he works for a Senator from Maine," Ginger says, "maybe he'll give us a couple of lobsters as a reward."

"Don't bet on it."

When someone lost and nervous-looking, wearing a trench coat reminiscent of Deep Throat, shows up outside the lobby's glass door, I open it, step out, and ask him to identify himself. After he says the correct name, I hold out the briefcase. Without establishing eye contact, he snatches away the briefcase, mumbles "Thanks," pivots, makes tracks, and doesn't look back.

"No lobsters," I tell Ginger. "I wouldn't've trusted them anyway. You think I should've called Ben Bradlee?"

"No," Ginger says. "You should've walked out to the middle of Connecticut Avenue Bridge and dropped it into Rock Creek."

Now, my friends assure me, "You did the right thing. If nothing else, you saved his career."

One jokes, "Nowadays, you'd be made to disappear."

"But at whose hand?" I ask.

Take your pick," he says. "The CIA, to make sure nobody finds out what you found. Or the KGB: once they've relieved you of it, they'd surely feed you to the fishies."

"Good thing cell phones didn't exist," Ginger adds, "because I'm sure you would've copied every page."

Given how often the spiriting of highly sensitive and even classified data by government officials has been front page news, the events I described should come as no surprise. But I'll tell you this: if someone throws me the nuclear football, I'm faking right and running left.



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, Newfound, Stonecoast, The Atlantic, and Typehouse.. Jim's recently-published photo essays include Barren, DASH, Kestrel, Litro, New World Writing, Sweet, Typehouse, and Wordpeace. Jim has also published graphic nonfiction pieces based on old postcards, such as Barren, Ilanot Review, Palaver, and Litro. He wrote/acted in a one act play. A nonfiction piece led to appearances in a high-profile documentary limited series broadcast internationally. A nonfiction piece was recently nominated for Best of the Net. Jim and family split their time between city and mountains.



CroXXroads

By Dia VanGunten

Architecture rumbled and unrooted. The house heaved and peaked. It clattered and cracked into sharp shards of glass. It rattled and shook and lost its innards. Velvet quilts, dried roses, and pasted Valentines. Serial killer collector cards, an enviable record collection, Babe the Blue Ox. Mexican wrestler mask, marionettes, and crusty bottles of shampoo. Lacquer desk, pale blue like a bird's egg. Pink, crystal goblets. Paired paintings of Tanuki and Kitsune. Haunting Polaroid of a clown in a long-gone parade. Poodle piggy bank, wind-up robots, and water whistles that sound like birds. Tiny wooden Jeff. Junk drawer. Mousetrap. Cock ring. MAC lipsticks. Sequined sombrero, too-small bra, tights that roll. Silk kaftan. Gold Prada platforms (a steal for 40 dollars). Glass bong and silver dog bowls. Flocked bust of Chairman Mao as Mickey Mouse.

Thigh-high statue of Aphrodite laden with silk leis, Mardi Gras beads and plastic rosaries. Tower of dream journals; years of hypergraphia, rings in a tree. Tiny, yellow book by Cookie Mueller found in a Savers grab-bag with yellow items, like a taxicab matchbox and Buttercup the Powerpuff. Hundreds of books. A massive hoard. A murder of crows, papery wings flapping. Tom Robbins, John Waters, PKD. Slim volumes of poetry and inked-up tomes on quantum entanglement. Vintage paperback: *Rumor, Fear and the Madness of Crowds*. Big coffee-table book about butts.

I spot a flying dildo and laugh, even though I'm lodged in the house's throat—me and a rainbow chandelier—because I realize this is **EPIC TRICKSTER ENERGY**. Eshu sneaks into houses and switches the belongings of the residents so that they will be confused, unsettled, and out of sorts. When my brother finds me, I am laid out: an action-sized Creature from the Black Lagoon with translucent, plastic skin and webbed feet. I am on display, on the ground, in and out of seizure. *It's Coyote, I say; he's here for me. He's come to cause some chaos.*

Sutton says, "Why on earth would you want that in a god?"

I offer a twitching shrug: "Tricksters keep it real, bruh."

There's a housing boom in Austin in the middle of the mortgage crisis, and I've taken out a home equity loan on a strategic corner lot of my exploding city. It was way too easy for a legally disabled epileptic with bad credit and some fucked-up need to prove my value through industry, as if that would erase this diversion—this disability. Bankers were eager to take advantage because I owned it outright, got it for nothing, and only borrowed a fraction of its value. But it was mine. I scouted it, and I found it in a booming housing market. I saw through the neglect and the nicotine stains. I trusted that foundation. It was the stucco walls. They were heavy and prone to cracks, but they were cooler in the Texas summer. I made an offer. They tried to back out after the clean bill of inspection, but Dad was still alive, so he fought them like Father Lion. It was mine, and I made it a little landmark of weird on a corner that broke open around me, and everyone who knew anything said wow. I joked that I bought it with pixie dust, but it was damn near the truth. So I fancy myself as "savvy." As if I'm someone who should start a storybook-themed boutique to make something. Money? I do not have capitalist instincts, so there was a whole lot wrong with this business plan, but the biggest is the reason that Coyote is kicking my ass. Because **I am a writer**. Not the functional kind: a go-getter who is successful and married with children. No, I'm a hobgoblin who works manically, with snorts and farts, clouds of smoke, and gnashing teeth. I was crazy to think I could be a shopkeeper who wrote long form-fiction in between customers.

The wrong path is beset with beasts. A pack of coyotes ripped me to shreds and delivered my carcass to a seven-tailed fox. It didn't have to be this dramatic. I ignored multiple trickster alarms: chaotic elements, unhinged omens, and eviction letters. I was a burned out heap, radio-silent and bed bound, before I was sucked into a swirling vortex of shame, blame and whimsical talismans. It was brutal, but I asked for it. No, really, I did. I signed on for exactly this flavor of trouble. I was in Tucson for a conference, *Towards a Unified Science of Consciousness*, where physicists, neurologists, and biologists explore the mysteries of our pink meat. I was just a novelist. That was my "ist." I had just purchased a small sculpture of a fox made from yellow metal that had been recovered from an old school bus. This felt meaningful because I lived in a painted hippie bus as a child. I found it fitting that an old bus should become a fox. (If you've ever seen Ghibli's Cat bus, then you understand.)

In my backpack, more Bible than book, Lewis Hyde's *Trickster Makes This World* was dog-eared and heavily notated. As I was crossing a four-way intersection with my school-bus fox, I consciously invited the mythic trickster into my life. Was Loki like Dracula? Do tricksters require a formal invitation. No, no, we're all subject to this overturning, right-setting energy. I'd simply asked for extra servings. There's no category for someone like myself, no congregation.

I snatched a feather from the foot of Hermes like he stole Apollo's cows. *Do your best with me. I dare you.* Consequently, I can never come-to-center. No complacency, no normalcy. No wealth. I can't be a shining member of society who lives a "respectable" life. I am a double-taker and a line-crosser, a fringe-dweller and an outlier. I gotta stick close to the edges because that's where the magic happens. Light leaks in and secrets spill. I am a big, pink dildo sailing into the clouds.

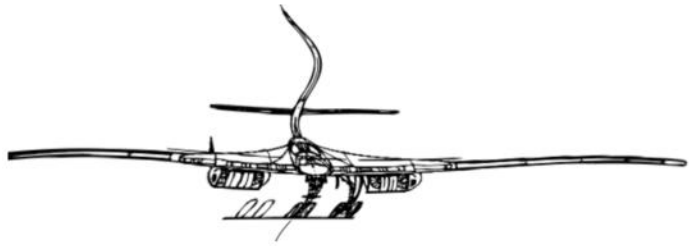


Dia VanGunten focuses on intimate, character-centered storytelling. Sometimes that character is herself. Her current fiction project is Pink Zombie Rose.

@pinkzombierose

Babel

By Anu Pohani



Airplanes. Wonders of human imagination, the products of increasingly disparate hands, over a century's worth of complexity. An Airbus A350 can carry up to 350 passengers and contains 2.65 million parts - the cumulative work of over 4,000 engineers. Its wings are manufactured in Spain. Its engine, as large as a house, is constructed in the United Kingdom, with components arriving from China, India, or Malaysia. Airbus conceived the Beluga aircraft in the 1990s to transport plane parts from manufacturing sites to assembly locations. In 2020, a new model, the Beluga XL, took over the job as proud sky monsters grew in capacity and reach, necessitating even larger components.

Under the London Heathrow Airport flight path, the first plane usually wakes the community before the sun or an alarm clock can signal imminent dawn. Section 78 of the Civil Aviation Act 1982 was enacted due to environmental concern, and to meet "noise abatement objectives". It created a quota system limiting the number of planes that may land between 0430 and 0600. Local resident associations complain regularly, irked by the anti-Circadian rhythm the flying beasts engender. Complaints are but a nuisance the government ignores. An individual's right to sleep comes secondary to the collective right of commerce. It is a quota, not a complete ban; everyone is within their rights. There had been a fight against expansion of the airport and allowing a third runway. This has probably been forgotten, confined to the drawer of other lost arguments that never needed a battle.

According to the International Air Travel Association (IATA), there were over 100,000 flights which crisscrossed the world each day in 2019. A portion of this transport was businessmen who caroused or worked at 30,000 feet, and felt the weight of their importance, pressed against their seat, which fought the strength of gravity with jet propulsion. There is value in fleshly handshakes, in huddling heads around the boardroom, in collectively breathing corporate purpose. Some routes allow for families to send their brethren far away to seek economic betterment. Their clans are secured by scheduled and predictable carriages to reunite them; they bargain with time. One day, "We'll Meet Again." Family émigrés will return, bring gifts, hug warmly, and breathe in the smell of a love long separated.

The tourists are the pinnacle of the airborne miracle. They peruse a near-infinite menu of voyages. They experience the wonder of mountains, feel underwater depths, bask in tropical climates, and eat the histories, cultures and languages of the world. Airborne journeys sate desires for knowledge, challenge, adventure, and escape—wealth and vacation allowances permitting. Our forebears could not have gathered these disparate sensations in one lifetime, hemmed in by the inaccessibility of the world.

We knew better, but having ignored the true cost of our hubris, bore witness to a slow annihilation. The speed and frequency with which planes move people, luggage, and the things we inadvertently carry, were effectively instruments for our demise. Our airborne brilliance, an agent of chaos, repeatedly moved a microscopic pathogen around the planet, and contaminated everything in reach. So, the skies fell silent. The flying dragons were grounded by their awe-inspiring capacity and growing reach. We looked skyward, missing the white noise comfort, ruing the reduced capacity to feel a squeeze of the hand, the warmth of a kiss from a tie never intended to be severed.

A temporary semblance of order returns; we cannot ignore the forces unleashed.

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, Ruby Lit and Hellebore, among others.

Anxious. Can't Sleep

By Ally Riddle



Too much of my time is spent reading about sleep. If only that time could be spent actually sleeping. Instead, I learn how detrimental it is to my immune system not to. At this point, cancer or Alzheimer's must be guaranteed. Through embarking on this sleep—or lack of it—journey, I've stumbled upon that old French chronobiologist guy, Jean Jacques d'Ortous Mairan. He discovered that heliotropic plants, which are essentially prettier and less-destructive versions of us humans, are not actually subjected to the sun's patterns. Later studies related this to humans, and we've discovered the circadian rhythm, a biological clock internally driven by the suprachiasmatic nucleus. Pretty cool. Mine is just broken.

Only on the most restless of nights do I turn to the thought of falling in bed next to Elise. The feeling of falling persists as I run my fingers up and down the cotton sheets that mimic the feel of their skin. Syncing the rise and fall of my chest to theirs, my stomach finally settles, and I land in their embrace. Their right forearm proudly displays a dagger tattoo and is secured tightly around my chest like a seatbelt that has been protecting me since I broke contact with my ex, the most notable of demons locked in my Pandora's box. The key I've misplaced as it is far too easily surrendered to anyone who asks nicely.

With exception of the circadian rhythm, there are biological processes that are very much tied to the sun's patterns. For example, my anxiety. Ever since I lost the one I loved — or should I say, was toxically codependent on and would readily abandon all remnants of self and die for — my anxiety rears its head as the day expires. It activates each pain receptor that resides in my body and sucks every ounce of joy from my bones like a hungry vampire. I wonder if that could explain my pale complexion and quickly dwindling friend group.

To preface the remaining paragraphs, I will be giving my anxiety she/her pronouns. At this point, all manifestations of my fear can be linked to subjects with those identifiers. My mommy issues, ex-partner, queerness, and hyper-fixation on my gender expression. Her, her, her, and her(?). During the day she conceals herself in the depths of my mind, just waiting. Toying with me. Mornings trick me into believing I am free. Hedonic adaptation is failing to desensitize me, as she continues to make her grand debut every evening. It's too easy to pick lovers over friends when you are a love addict. Over the past month, I've no longer been able to tell which category Elise falls into; my desire for more time is often met with more distance. Nonetheless, I have become accustomed to the fantasy of their presence, even with the exponential increase in time between visits, their body still cradles me through the worst hours of the day, for a moment anyway.

Each night as the sun sets, the sky is flooded with a bloody red, and the time I had been given to finally wash the piling dishes in the sink is taken. Earth has completed a rotation about its axis, and God hasn't sent me a sign despite my incessant and desperate pleading. A full day, and I'm so exhausted — all the books about sleep still haven't taught me how to do it. 24 hours, and my ex still hasn't texted telling me she can't go another day without me.

Elise's arm, which was supposed to shield me from my past, now suffocates me. The cotton sheets that were gently cradling my restless body scratch at my bare skin. My partners operate like flimsy bandages, too soon they are over-saturated by the bleeding wounds that lie within. Malignant wounds so deep, woven into the intricate fabric of my DNA, infecting me while violently transmitting the pathogens to those I seek to fix me. Thanks, mom. Careful not to disrupt Elise from their sacred and peaceful slumber, I unsheathe the dagger from their forearm and attempt to carve out the pieces of myself that I've lost in them, too. Tonight, I've managed to add a second ghost that haunts my prolonged wakefulness.

My only solace at this point is that the mercies of my anxiety are new every morning. I will soon feel free from her again. The hourglass will be flipped, and the sand will fill the hollow cavity in my chest that my ex created when she left, two, maybe three times ago now. As the great artist generously pours light through my windows at dawn, I will breathe freely. Until night returns, and my vampiric nervous system is permitted to run wild, sucking away at my soul.

Ally graduated from the University of Minnesota with a BA in Biology, Society, & Environment and is currently pursuing an MA in Interdisciplinary Studies at New York University. Her creative work has appeared almost exclusively in pocket journals, most of which have been misplaced.

This Body is Mine

By Pavel Paramonov

Each person says about their own body “this is me,” often not grasping that there’s more to “me” than just that. On the other hand, it’s the only thing that each person sees in the mirror when looking at themselves; it’s the only thing that other people see when they’re looking at me. It’s the only thing that is seen by my near and dear ones who know me like the back of their hands! And even those near and dear ones who observe and know about my habits, my past and my present, my thoughts, the emotions expressed on my face – and what they might mean – these people see only one thing, my underlying substance: my body. Shall we talk about it?

How far back do I remember myself? I don’t remember. I’m not being coy here; I really don’t remember the beginning. While I remember it (“it” shall henceforth be referred to as “my body”), I also don’t remember it! However, of course, I do know for sure that it was when my body was small; at the age of three, it almost died along with me from raw cabbage poisoning. Presumably this cabbage was tasty, although I don’t remember that either. I know of this event only from a story told by my father, who found a tractor in time and managed to deliver my body in a snowstorm (but it was he who recalled it because I have no memory of myself at that age) to the nearest hospital.

Let’s dissect this matter further. Indeed, in Russian, the word “telo” (телo), which means “body,” is neuter in gender and corresponds to the statement “it (neuter) is mine (also neuter),” and I feel that my native language somehow inspires a somewhat dismissive attitude towards my body. Yes, this body is mine, like this computer keyboard, like the computer itself on which my fingers are now tapping out the letters that shape and are shaped by my thoughts. It’s a bit crazy, but I really think that it’s a good example of my understanding of my body and myself.

Now we know – or assume – how I ought to have initially related to my body when I acquired consciousness as I started to become aware of myself.

And now it turned out that I had a frail, weak body! It couldn’t cope with the bullies in kindergarten and primary school. My body didn’t want to pull itself up onto the horizontal bar! And if my body did manage to pull itself up, this was due only to the lack of weight on it. My body didn’t want to gain weight and didn’t want to eat meat for this purpose, being content with only “a little buttery bikkie and a little cuppa tea” (a little buttery biscuit with a bit of sweet tea)! Years passed, but my body didn’t want to play football or skate at all, and it was only thanks to the efforts of my friend Sanka Aleksandrov, during the summer holidays between first and second grade, that my body barely learnt to swim!

Should I say I wasn’t satisfied with my body? No, I don’t recall such a reaction, but I still felt some disappointment in myself because of it. This feeling, by the age of thirteen became so strong, along with the desire to please and possess the opposite sex, that they overcame my innate laziness and forced my body to play sports according to the guidelines of a program published in a youth magazine. Nowadays half of the earth’s inhabitants might not understand how I’ve ultimately managed to forget what I learnt from this magazine. Hey, after all, everything is online! But back then, it wasn’t, at least not for me.

So, I took part in the program, and my body began to pull itself up onto the water pipe that led under the ceiling to the bathroom, improving both performance and results with this exercise! 5.....7.....10.....15.....16! Sixteen times! Why were my results stalling? My goal was 25 times! Why was it becoming harder and harder for me to duplicate the results I had already achieved? Yes, I’d been ill with a fever and a cough, but the illness had passed! Only a slight temperature remained, to which I didn’t pay much attention: 37.2 C, but I was coughing entire lung-loads of air! It seemed to me, in my ignorance, that my body would make a full recovery on its own...I was strong and wouldn’t back down...Fifteen times! My body could pull itself up only fifteen times on another day, with my brain (or me) searching for excuses for this. But what? Apparently, the excuses weren’t convincing, so my recollection of them is quite vague: “It’s just a slight setback” or “15 times! Not everyone in school can do this!” But this didn’t satisfy me. What would the outcome be? A high likelihood of my body’s death? And, if so, should I be recognized as the one responsible for its death? Not intentionally, but yes, I was the one, with my ignorance, with my fear of change and fear of someone else’s opinion, who could kill it, as opposed to when I – or my body – had innocently eaten the raw cabbage from which my father had to save me.



Why am I writing about this now? Because in February my entire class underwent a routine fluorography chest X-ray screening, after which my body was admitted to a tuberculosis dispensary with a case of pneumonia in one lung. Even though the illness was detected in time to be treated, this was still due to my, but not my body's, vanity.

I should be grateful to Sir Alexander Fleming, and I certainly am! Antibiotics brought me back to my old life, and my body increased its performance to twenty-eight pull-ups on the bar, a record not only for the upper grades, but also for the entire school! Despite this, my body still couldn't stand up for itself in a fight, so my body and I needed someone else to teach us, since we were unable to master this science alone, using the plan that we'd been applying.

I should state here that I believe a person is a combination of spirit (will), mind (reason), and body. Here I am, with my body adjacent to my spirit and my mind; it belongs to my spirit and my mind, and it is mine even when I don't remember myself! Without it, I am not here; I will not see myself in the mirror, no one will see me with their eyes, although I suspect that God does not use eyes to see. God sees, but not with eyes; we are simply with God. But for our understanding, there is no other concept like the look that makes use of the eyes. What came first: the egg or the chicken? I was born, or my body was born. If the latter is true, I wasn't born, but rather became, at first a little being, then a name, then an address, then a citizen, and so on. But these are merely trappings assigned to the body. Yet apart from me, my body is only a body that no one needs. Believe me, no one needs your body without you. Even the most beautiful body, like a sexy doll, will become boring without a mind.

Shall we go on? My body learnt how to defend itself quite successfully thanks to its boxing coach. And I thank boxing itself for my understanding of my body. Now, from a distance, from the depths of today, I'm truly sure that my entire (with the same applying to your entire) body is a single entity, one brain, one cumulative "I," with nerves and nerve endings throughout, all collaborating with me. Yes, they can be torn off, and I will remain, but the part of this entity that was one with me will no longer exist. And without it, without that part, I will not be a whole me even if I quickly become accustomed to the new situation and tolerate it. Upon seeing the other, full-fledged "I" separate from me and glancing at its body, I understand that, over time, I will lose sharpness and become bitter that I am not like it or am ceasing to exist while still living. But what is wrong here? Is this how weak, old people are supposed to feel? Losing their bodily functions slowly or all at once? Are we all destined to experience the horror of gradually getting used to helplessness, if even for a short time, a short time that may turn out to be never-ending hell?

My body put a fifty-kilogram bag of flour, taken from the back seat of a car, on my body's right shoulder and carried this bag up to the second floor, to the apartment where I live. Why is it so hard for me? Why does sweat appear on my forehead? Why am I so weak? Is this my first time carrying bags? Okay, now everything will pass. My body went back down for the second bag, despite the dark dots flying before my eyes, despite the feeling of spreading weakness in my right hand, as if I'd lain on that hand, and now the blood supply was being restored in it. My body then lifted one more bag, the last bag, up to the second floor. Then it managed to walk back down, get into the car, and with the help of its left hand, helped his right hand to shift to first gear to get to the garage.

Now everything will pass. I calmed my body down. I went to piss, calmed down some more, and put the car in the garage. Was there wet snow? I needed to calm down and not step on the gas too hard! I stepped off the palisade. What was it? Did I trip? Anyway, I decided to get up, but why was I tilting to the right side? After all, I rested using both hands! At this point I looked at my right hand.

Using my brain, I sensed the ground and continued to rest on it with both hands. But only the right hand lay absolutely motionless, not obeying my commands at all.

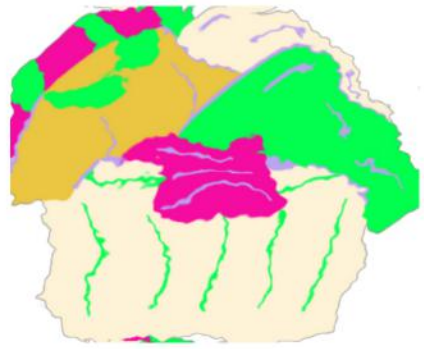
I don't try to imagine it; even now when I close my eyes, I can't imagine a punch or a right hook the way it should be. Since the stroke, my brain – not me, but my brain – is the one that doesn't permit me to do this.

I know everything can change, like when I was tired of being weak and when I started wanting to please girls. In fact, everything can change, and everything is possible. It's not easy. Just never, ever give up!

Pavel Paramonov lives near Nizhny Novgorod, Russia, where he works as an occupational safety specialist. He has fulfilled a number of other roles in life, ranging from son, brother, friend, father and grandfather to combine operator, watchman, boxer, agricultural student, telephone operator and general director of a bread and pasta production complex. In his free time, he enjoys cooking, reading, watching historical documentaries and dramas and being in the water. Pavel is a poet, fiction writer and essayist, and his work has been published in *Trouvaille Review*.

Free Store

By Jim Ross



Having negative cash flow, the Free Store couldn't pay its rent. I learned of its eviction when a housemate announced, "The Free Store's moving into our basement." Within hours, a pickup truck pulled alongside our house and two women started lolling boxes into our dirt-floored, walk-in basement. After they left, I counted 32 boxes of clothing sorted by adult/child and male/female. Many weren't even marked. I haphazardly began organizing.

Because the Free Store's traffic had been generated when passersby dropped in, it wasn't clear how we'd find customers. Our wood-frame, farm-style house was backed on a forest, at the bottom of a dead-end hill. Nobody ever "passed by." To get things rolling, I picked out a few casual shirts and a ROTC uniform I thought would be eye-catching at anti-war demonstrations.

Our bi-racial commune was still formulating what we protested against and the sort of world we sought to create. Two doors up, bi-racial Pig Patrol monitored racism and the use of force by local police. Across the street, Aquarius House, with seven white members, sought to accelerate the Age of Aquarius. Most neighbors were black and lived in 1920s townhomes.

When a Black family from the South moved in next door, we saw opportunity. We estimated sizes for mama, papa, Lucy about 5, Edgar about 7, then tapped the Free Store to deliver the goods. Mama smiled broadly, ducking inside her door weighed down with boxes.

We quickly noticed that the kids wore the same outfits day after day. Lucy wore one dress until it literally fell apart. It didn't help that Lucy appeared to be getting skinnier. One day, Edgar asked, "You got more clothes, Mister?" I led him into the basement where, together, we selected outfits for each family member.

One day, I noticed 13 boxes had disappeared from our inventory. Without conferring with anybody else, a housemate called the police, who arrived to take report. Later, Edgar cried because the police said I told them he'd stolen the 13 boxes but he told them, "Mister's my friend, he couldna said I did it, and he couldna snitched to the po-leece either." Edgar and I got past that, but I never quite forgave the police.

In January, we officially listed our house as a crash pad. By February, we had one or more crashers nightly. We encouraged crashers to visit the Free Store; some obliged. If crashers left behind their underpants, socks, or other garments, we washed them and added them to our inventory. In March, the sounds of crasher laughter coming from the living room caused us to conduct an experiment for one week; we took over the living room and offered our bedrooms to crashers. Women said they felt safer that way. Occasionally, we had to clarify that clothing in our bedrooms wasn't free.

By April we had four to eight crashers nightly. During the week leading up to the *Vietnam Out Now Rally*, we were inundated. That trailed off during the week of widespread civil disobedience that followed. A couple of crashers left with boxes of clothing.

A week after the violent May Day demonstrations, somebody broke into our house and stole our TV and stereo system. We called the police who dutifully took a report. A week later, someone again broke in and took our toaster, blender, and other minor appliances. We didn't bother the police. The next week someone went through our house with a fine tooth comb, taking anything else of value. By then, I'd moved into the attic, where I'd buried my camera under dirty clothes in my hamper and kept my money in an old coffee mug. Even my camera and money were stolen. Somebody really took their time or knew what they were after.

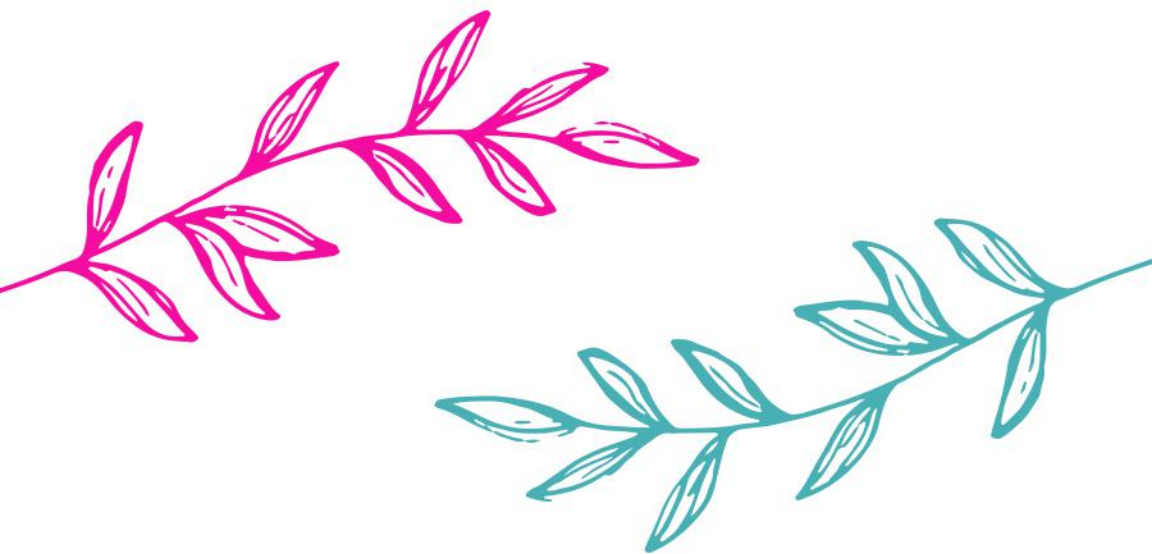
Feeling stripped to the bone, we thought there was nothing left to steal. However, two weeks later, somebody unhinged our carved oak front door and carried it off. I picked up what possessions I could carry—my black-and-white sheepskin bedspread, a bag of clothes, the ROTC uniform, a dozen LPs, my school books — and walked nearly a mile to another group house, where I crashed on the couch. A week later, I went back to fetch my manual Royal typewriter and learned that somebody had carried off two ground-floor window shutters.

I spent the summer at the new group house with six women from Trinity College—poets, dancers, activists—who had taken over the lease for the Radical Lesbian Transient House. We baked bread, wrote poetry, practiced dance as protest, and cared for our pet mice, Emma Goldman and Moussie Tung.

At summer's end, my Trinity housemates moved back onto campus. One of the Trinity women wanted a weekend/emergency crash pad for her Trinity sisters to break the repressive cycle of hypercontrol. I needed a place to live. She and I borrowed a newborn to pose as a couple, thinking that a cooing baby effused us with credibility, even in the absence of an income stream. Our ruse failed.

Two days before the lease's expiration, somebody broke in and stole my sheepskin, ROTC uniform, clothes, and my LPs, leaving behind only my manual Royal typewriter. Fortunately, I'd been storing my school books, papers, and some clothes in the beaten-up, red-white-and-blue VW bus I'd purchased two months before with the last of my cash.

I took to passing my nights in a sleeping bag in an urban forest. Having no way for schools to reach me put me out of work as a substitute teacher. I also lost my fellowship to Howard University. But there in my forest haven, I resonated to *Dark Night of the Soul* ("All ceased and I abandoned myself, leaving my cares forgotten among the lilies") and *Soul on Ice* ("I seek a lasting relationship, something permanent in a world of change, in which all is transitory, ephemeral, and full of pain"). The silhouettes of leaves hanging on against the winds danced on the page. I wrote about the goings-on using my trusty Royal in the back of the bus.



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, Newfound, Stonecoast, The Atlantic, and Typehouse.. Jim's recently-published photo essays include Barren, DASH, Kestrel, Litro, New World Writing, Sweet, Typehouse, and Wordpeace. Jim has also published graphic nonfiction pieces based on old postcards, such as Barren, Ilanot Review, Palaver, and Litro. He wrote/acted in a one act play. A nonfiction piece led to appearances in a high-profile documentary limited series broadcast internationally. A nonfiction piece was recently nominated for Best of the Net. Jim and family split their time between city and mountains.



The House on Cedar Drive

By Elizabeth Jaeger

Nothing is as it should be. At the beach, I had to set up the umbrella. It's a simple task, but I'm not supposed to do it. Dad never let anyone but my son help him. But Dad isn't here anymore. COVID stole him from us, and after more than a year, we still haven't regained our balance. I miss him terribly.

I always enjoyed visiting Dad at his beach house, and since his death, I still enjoy visiting because the house is saturated with memories of him. But now, after almost two years, Mom is selling the house he loved, the house in which my son and I were always happiest.

Perhaps it's silly to love a house. It's an inanimate object that is made of wood, glass, and stone. But it's not about the physical make-up, it's the memories tucked into the crevices. The stories unfolded inside. The smiles and giggles rippling through the walls. The moments I now grasp at as I am waking up only to realize once again that everything has changed.

My parents had bought the house when I was sixteen. It'd been falling apart, but was all they could afford. Dad hired someone to completely renovate it, and I spent spring break with Mom raking leaves and doing yard work. It didn't take long for it to feel like home. However, Mom didn't drive, so without Dad, she had no way to get out here. I offered to take charge and care for it, but Mom wanted more from me than I could promise. With a child, I couldn't commit to driving out here as frequently as she would have liked in order to tend to any required maintenance. Despite my pleas, she called a realtor. I begged her to rent instead of sell, but she refused. The stress and anxiety of caring for two houses was overwhelming. So now, the love Dad poured into this place was being reduced to an anticipated check.

Since Mom has no one else, the task of helping her pack it up falls to me. With reluctant footsteps, I wander through the house taking knickknacks off shelves, wrapping dishes in newspaper, discarding crap I forgot we even owned. Mom and I sort through Dad's things. A pile for what we will keep. Another for trash. I want to hoard it all, but hoarding won't bring him back. If he were here we'd be buying a new grill, then tossing the one that no longer works. If he were here, my eleven-year-old son wouldn't be in New Jersey. He'd be with his grandfather in the house that used to be his palace. If Dad were here, Mom might remember how to smile.

When Mom finally retreats into her room and tries to sleep, I sit quietly in the living room — alone. If I'm quiet enough, if I'm still enough, maybe I can catch a glimpse of Dad? When he first died, I thought he was haunting the house. One afternoon, remembering how much he had hated eating out on the porch, I sat in his wooden chair, and it cracked. Another time, I plopped down on the couch and the curtain fell on me. Was it a coincidence that things started to fall apart after his death or did he somehow have a hand in it? Was he trying to communicate from afar without words, without us being able to see him?

No, I don't really believe in ghosts, but lately I feel so alone that I need to believe in something. From Mom's room, I hear muffled cries. Perhaps they are tears of regret. Now that she has found a buyer, does she wish she hadn't? I've tried to comfort her all day, but sometimes words—or even my presence—aren't enough.

My eyes drift around the house, my mind conjuring up images, moments I long to relive. I see Dad sitting at the table prepping the shrimp for scampi. I see him cuddled up in his chair with my son, the two of them watching a movie. In Dad's room, he reads an *Elephant and Piggie* book with my son who, at four, loved those books. Through the back door, Dad is tossing a steak on the grill and beckoning a much younger me with his baseball glove, ready to have a catch. Together we rake leaves in the fall, and I help him put the kayaks up on the car. He sits in the dining room chair, a cake in front of him, my son on his back as we sing "Happy Birthday." In the kitchen, he is making waffles, my son's favorite. Then I hear his feet stomping across the porch, the front door sticks as he pushes it open, but when I turn to look no one is there.

I get up, walk into my room, and flip on the light. My eyes blink, and then I stare at the pen marks on the doorway, lines that chart my son's growth. Dad always wanted me to measure my son, especially if it had been awhile since we had last visited. He wanted to know how much his grandson had grown. I reach for the ruler and measure. Four inches. That's how much he has grown since Dad died. Four inches of absence. Four inches of memories that never got to be. I always thought my son would become an adult in this house, that I would mark his height until he stopped growing. But the house will be sold, and the wood will be painted over before I can finish measuring him. An incomplete record. A broken trail. Similar to his grandfather's life.

If only things had been different. If only my parents hadn't gone on a cruise. If only I had forced Dad to go to the hospital sooner. If only I had paid more attention early on to what was happening in the world. But things can only be different in my imagination, late at night when I close my eyes and pretend. I've always sucked at pretending. There is no escape. Reality defeats me. The house will soon belong to someone else.

When the world shut down, the plan had been that my son and I would weather the COVID storm out in Long Island with my parents. We'd stay safe, together, in a house removed from the epicenter. But then Dad started feeling sick. He told me not to wait for him. He told me that my son and I could go out to Mattituck whenever we wanted. The house, he assured me, was mine to use whenever I needed to get away. He didn't need to be here for me to be at home. But now he is dead, and his promises died with him. The house is no longer mine. Carrying nothing but memories, I close the door for the final time. I can barely see because tears blur my vision. I'm sure it is my imagination, but when I get in my car and shift into reverse, I glance back at the house and I swear I see Dad sitting on the stoop, hunched over, and crying.

Elizabeth Jaeger's essays, short stories, book reviews and poetry have been published in various print and online journals, including *Margate Bookie*, *Inscape*, *Shorts Magazine*, *Caustic Frolic*, *The Blue Nib*, *Capsule Stories*, *Watchung Review*, *Ovunque Siamo*, *Peacock Journal*, *Boston Accent Lit*, and *Italian Americana*. Newtown Literary published an excerpt from her novel-in-progress.



Wall Street's Dirty Secret: The Greatest Invention of Capitalism

By Cailean Shelley



It was a relatively warm day on October 3rd when I took the J train all the way downtown and got off at Broad Street. I passed by government-level security gates at the beginning of Wall Street, and found myself walking down an old cobble road towards the towering neoclassical facade of the New York Stock Exchange.

Tourists lined the sidewalks, and gawked in amazement at the architecture and landmarks before them. The streets were dotted with stores like Hermès, Tiffany & Co., and of course, Starbucks, serving as constant reminders of our presence in the womb of capitalism. I walked southeast down Wall Street, passed by an enormous Trump building to my left, and set out towards the destination of my excursion: New York's Municipal Slave Market.

This was not my first time in the Financial District, but it was the first time since receiving an education in which I was able to view my city through a critical perspective, normally overseen. While it is common knowledge slavery in America had begun with the arrival of the Dutch to New York City in the mid-1600s, few people know that Wall Street had also served as one of the earliest and largest slave markets in America¹. Eighty-one years before the New York Stock Exchange itself had been established, Wall Street had been designated as the first officially recognized slave market of New York in 1711².

The large population of enslaved peoples had made white residents uneasy. They had feared that the enslaved peoples' ability to walk around the city unsupervised would have allowed too many opportunities for unionization and rebellion. Thus, after complaints, The New York Municipal Slave Market had been created for thousands of enslaved Africans, and some Natives, to have been bought and sold in order to further control and inhibit unity and revolution. The visual terrain of Wall Street still serves as a constant reminder to this foundation. I couldn't help but notice that almost the entirety of the pedestrians in this district were either rushed business people or awed tourists, all of which were white.

Just like many critical sociological conversations, the story of Wall Street begins with the invasion, genocide, and colonization of the Native peoples. Their stolen land is where New York City sits upon. Through the racial formation of African peoples, European settlers had found it justifiable to enslave them under theoretical racial concepts like 'natural hierarchy' and 'white man's burden'. While New York City is now praised for its outwardly equal and progressive reputation, it is quite obvious while I walked around that racial and economic inequality had been built into the urban planning of this city. The Financial District is no exception.

The racial geography of FiDi is still representative of Wall Street's history. Being the epicenter of finance in America, it should be no surprise that the median income for the area is around \$124,000³. The racial demographics of this neighborhood are composed of 64% white residents and just 3.2% being Black residents⁴, illustrating race and economic status have had an intertwined and codependent relationship with one another that has been rooted in history. Slavery has made a permanent mark on Black Americans here⁵. Evident in current racial geographies and wealth gaps, the bedrock of American slavery has reproduced centuries of economic and political subjugation. There is little confusion on why this neighborhood, which had housed one of the first slave markets in American history, only has a Black population of just 3% over 300 years later.

1. Public Broadcasting Service, "The First Slave Auction at New Amsterdam in 1655", (n.d.)

2. Downtown Alliance, "The slave market at Pearl Street and Wall Street", (2021)

3. Statistical Atlas, "Financial District, New York, New York (Neighborhood). Race data", (n.d.)

4. Statistical Atlas, "Financial District, New York, New York (Neighborhood). Race data", (n.d.)

5. Thomas, Z., "The hidden links between slavery and Wall Street. BBC News" (2019)

I was lost in the maze of soaring skyscrapers and occasionally tripped over myself while staring up at the seemingly endless structures. Eventually, I stumbled upon a quiet little garden surrounded by concrete, a subtle reminder of nature's impermanence in this city. In the center of this rather dull garden was a green sign, unveiled just seven years ago by Mayor Bill de Blasio in 2015. It read "New York's Municipal Slave Market"; this was the official homage to the Wall Street atrocities, a tiny and insignificant sign barely bigger than my backpack. It was quietly tucked away under some trees in a small green space, dwarfed by the skyscraper it kneels before at 100 Wall Street. I found this inadequate gesture of recognition offensive and insulting to the scope and truth of America's horrific past. However, it makes sense that only a small and unnoticeable sign was erected in acknowledgment of this history. Any larger monument in the heart of Western capitalism would make apparent an unfavorable reminder: the greatest invention of capitalism was *slavery*.



Source: Untapped New York (2015)

Cailean Shelley is a second year Interdisciplinary Studies masters student at New York University's Graduate School of Arts and Sciences XE Department of Experimental Humanities and Social Engagement. Cailean is a sociologist and critical theorist. Their work aims to critically analyze normative American notions of culture, history, and power through challenging whiteness, social stratification, and exposing the legacies of slavery and colonialism.



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Prehistoric Scenery

By Dan Gonen

65x52 cm., acrylic, silk-screen on paper, 2021

Dan Gonen's work is focused on silk-screen printing, body based art and drawing. The main interest is depicting everyday life objects in relation to time and place, memory and present which in different ways tell anecdotes and visual stories. Inspired by nature, current affairs and principles of Pop-Art, his process of printing involves experiments with colours and materials, resulting in unexpected images.



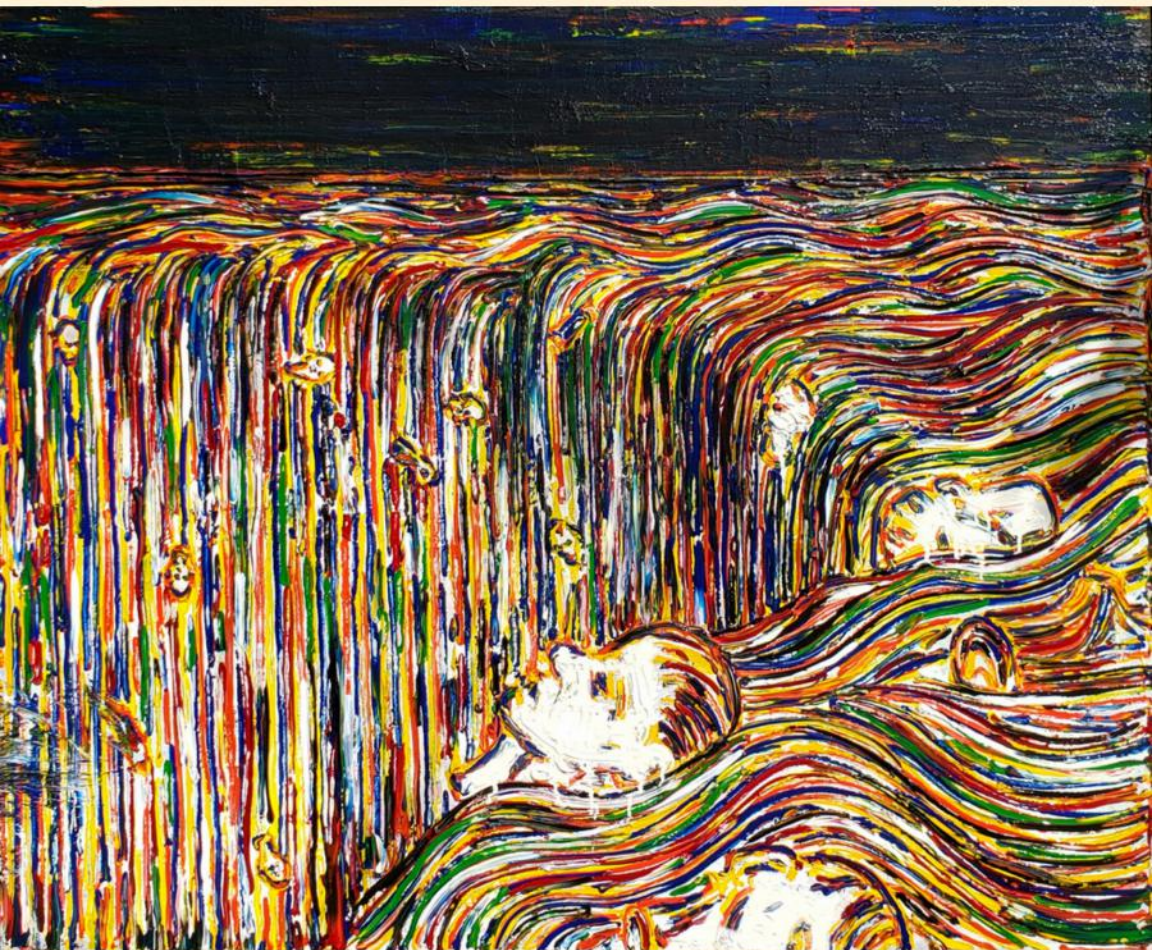
Marker

By Dennis Jones
60"x 60", acrylic, spray, on canvas, 2022.

The Gorge

By Dennis Jones

60"x 72", acrylic, spray, on canvas, 2022.



Gyre

By Dennis Jones

80'x 96", acrylic, spray, on canvas, 2022.



Epoch

By Dennis Jones

70"x 89", acrylic, spray, on canvas, 2022.



Dennis Michael Jones is a visual artist, educator, and licensed practicing architect. He has participated in several one person and group shows, totaling seventy exhibitions that include local, national, and international venues. His creative output has included paintings, sculptures, drawings, installation, photography, and books. Jones's current focus is on a growing body of paintings, in mixed media on canvas that combine elements of abstraction and figuration. In 2019, Jones's work was selected for publication in the New American Paintings Midwest Competition, Issue #143. His work can be found at dennismichaeljones.space.



Opera House in Odesa Reopens, Defying Putin's Barbarism

Deaths Feel 'Endless, And Toll Unknowable

Defiant showing of culture and a rebuke to destruction

In Bucha, a Mass Slaughter of 'Ordinary People

A suburb of Kyiv bears the scars of Russian atrocities

Flowers for Odesa

By Cristián Pietrapiana

Acrylic, ink, newspaper on canvas, 20x16 inches, 2022 (comment on Russia's invasion of Ukraine)

The World Has a Choice

By Cristián Pietrapiana

Acrylic, ink, newspaper on board, 20x24 inches, 2022 (comment on climate crisis)



Originally from Buenos Aires, Pietrapiana lives and works in New York City. His work explores the vulnerability of human nature and its environment. Pietrapiana has been awarded the Sheldon Bergh Award, was recently selected by the City of New York's DOT Art Program to create a site specific outdoors installation in LIC, Queens, selected artist of the LTA Program of the Guggenheim Museum, Chashama Residency Program as well as The Space Program in LIC. His work has been exhibited at Exit Art NY, AES Gallery NY, Local Project, The Argentine Consulate in NYC, El Bodegon Cultural de Los Vilos Art Center in Chile and Centro Cultural Recoleta in Buenos Aires, among other venues and part of the Pfizer Corporate Collection, The Springfield Museum of Art and private collectors. In the last few years he has incorporated the urgency of our climate crisis into his practice, organizing exhibitions and presentations in order to create awareness while inviting viewers to take action.

Order of Chaos

By Lore Skoulatos



Lore Skoulatos is a writer and artist from New York. Her artwork was showcased in galleries in NYC and the great metro area. Before receiving her BA in Philosophy from Adelphi University in 2019, Skoulatos was in the fashion-art industry and was a model and brand spokesperson featured in Mashable, Snapchat, Vanity Fair, TLC, and various art photography collections. Currently she is pursuing her masters in Interdisciplinary Studies at NYU focusing on the metaphysics of personal identity and narrativity surrounding women characters in myth and folklore retellings. She is currently working on her first fantasy novel and a mythology based poetry collection.

Artist Statement:

Always in pursuit of a meaningful reflection of who we are: our histories, our actions, and our creations, I navigate the intimately complex nature of our being through images. I'm constantly looking, searching, collecting, appropriating, and repurposing. As I move through the world, everywhere I'm provided with source material. If something I see resonates with me, if something leaves an impression on me, however intangible or inexplicable, it's photographed, scanned, downloaded, or screen captured. Images are stockpiled, placed, erased, degraded, printed, and layered. There is constant movement, back and forth, between the analog and digital worlds: a compilation of image, time, place, culture, and media.

Monoliths #28

By Mark Gens

2022 26 x 38 inches Ink jet print, collage, photography



Monoliths #33

By Mark Gens

2022 37 x 36 inches Ink jet print, collage, photography



Monoliths #49

By Mark Gens

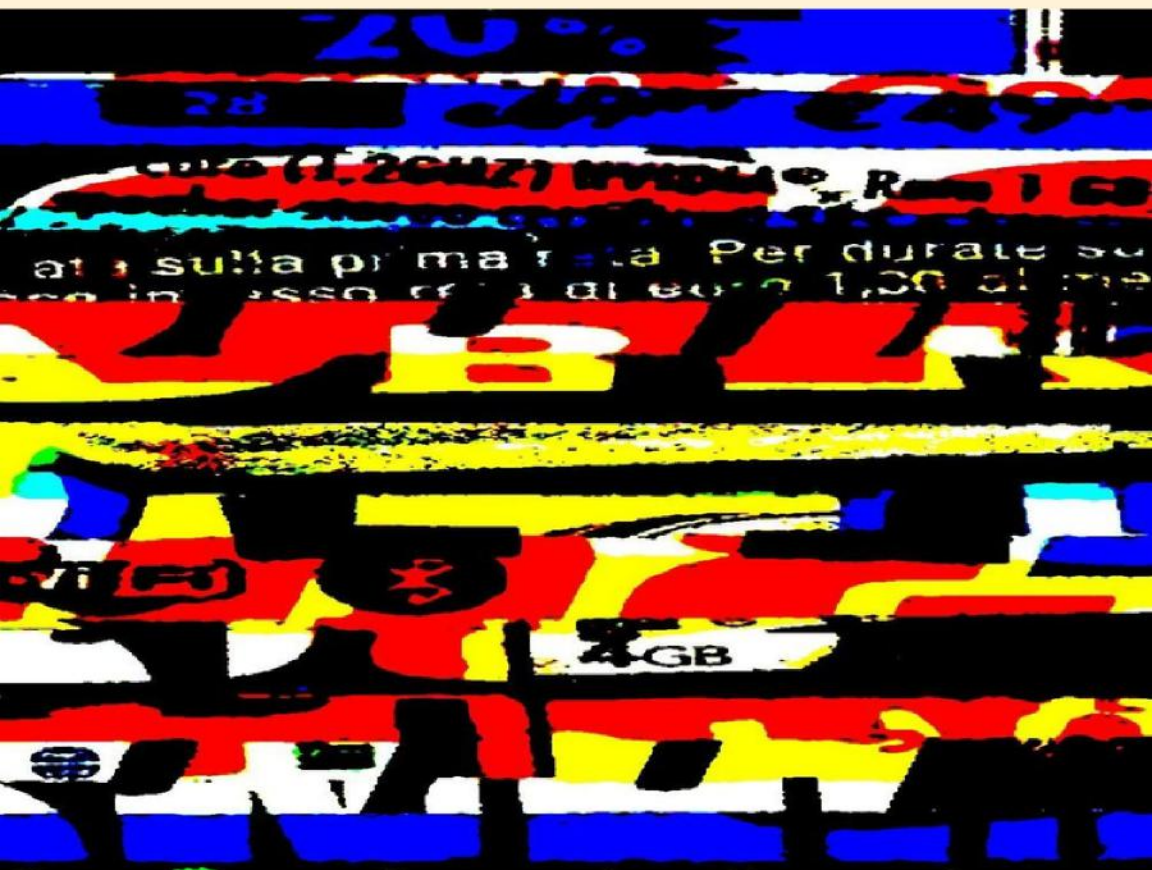
2022 26 x 38 inches Ink jet print, collage, photography



Mark Gens is a multimedia artist whose work includes collage, installation, video, e-literature, sculpture, and critical writing. He received his BFA from Otis College of Art(2014) in Los Angeles and his MFA from Pratt Institute(2016) in Brooklyn. In addition to his prolific studio practice, Mark has worked on community building projects with youth, curated exhibitions, and exhibited internationally. Both personal and political, Mark's work generates from his experience as a queer boy who came out in New York City amid the HIV/AIDS crisis of the 1980s and 90s. This deeply affecting experience became the driving force in his life and in his studio practice. Although this was a dark time for New York City, he was aware of the phenomenal burgeoning creativity: hip hop culture, activist art, street art, community organizing, ACT UP, etc. He understands how creative and cultural production have always served personal and political action.

Glitch

By Fabio Sassi

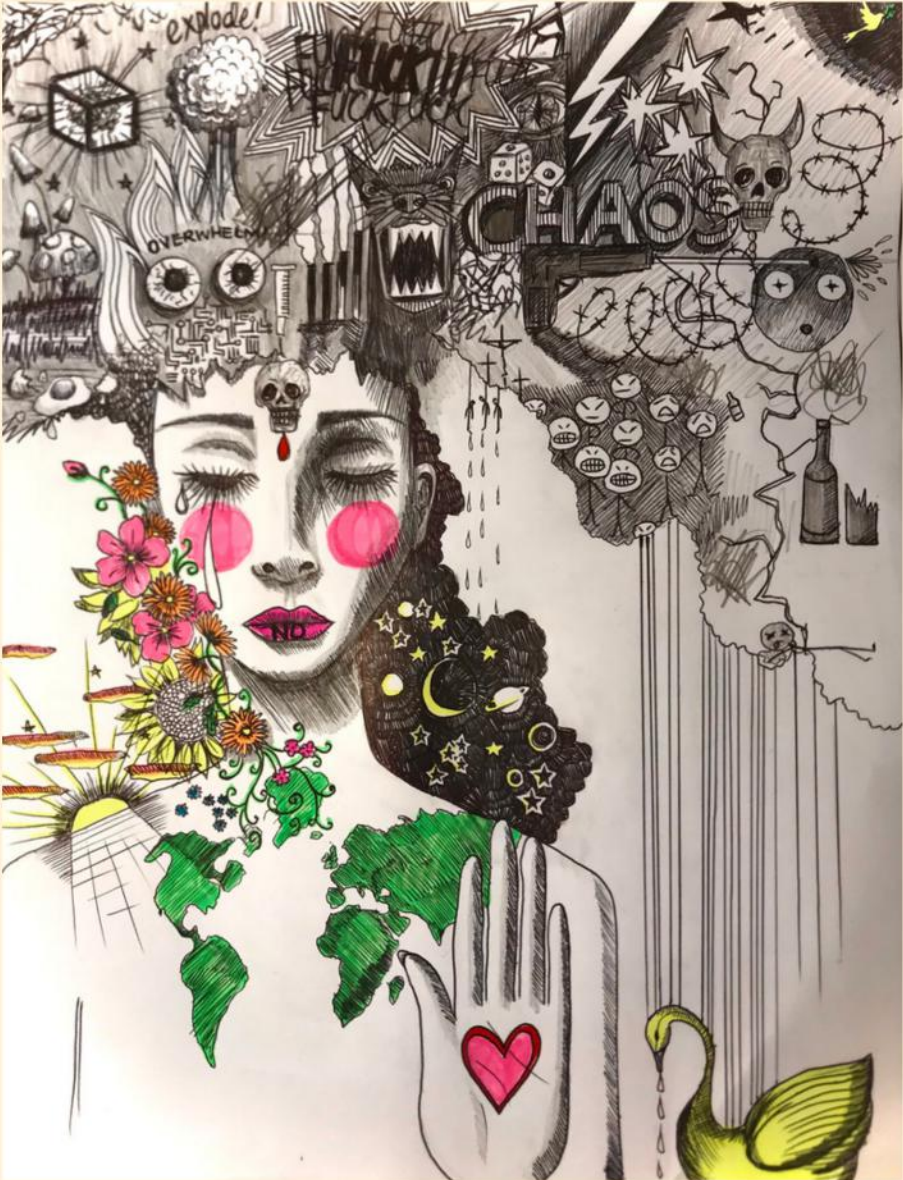


Fabio Sassi makes photos and acrylics using what is considered to have no worth by the mainstream. He really enjoys taking the everyday and ordinary and framing it in a different way. Fabio lives in Bologna, Italy and his work can be viewed at www.fabiosassi.foliohd.com.

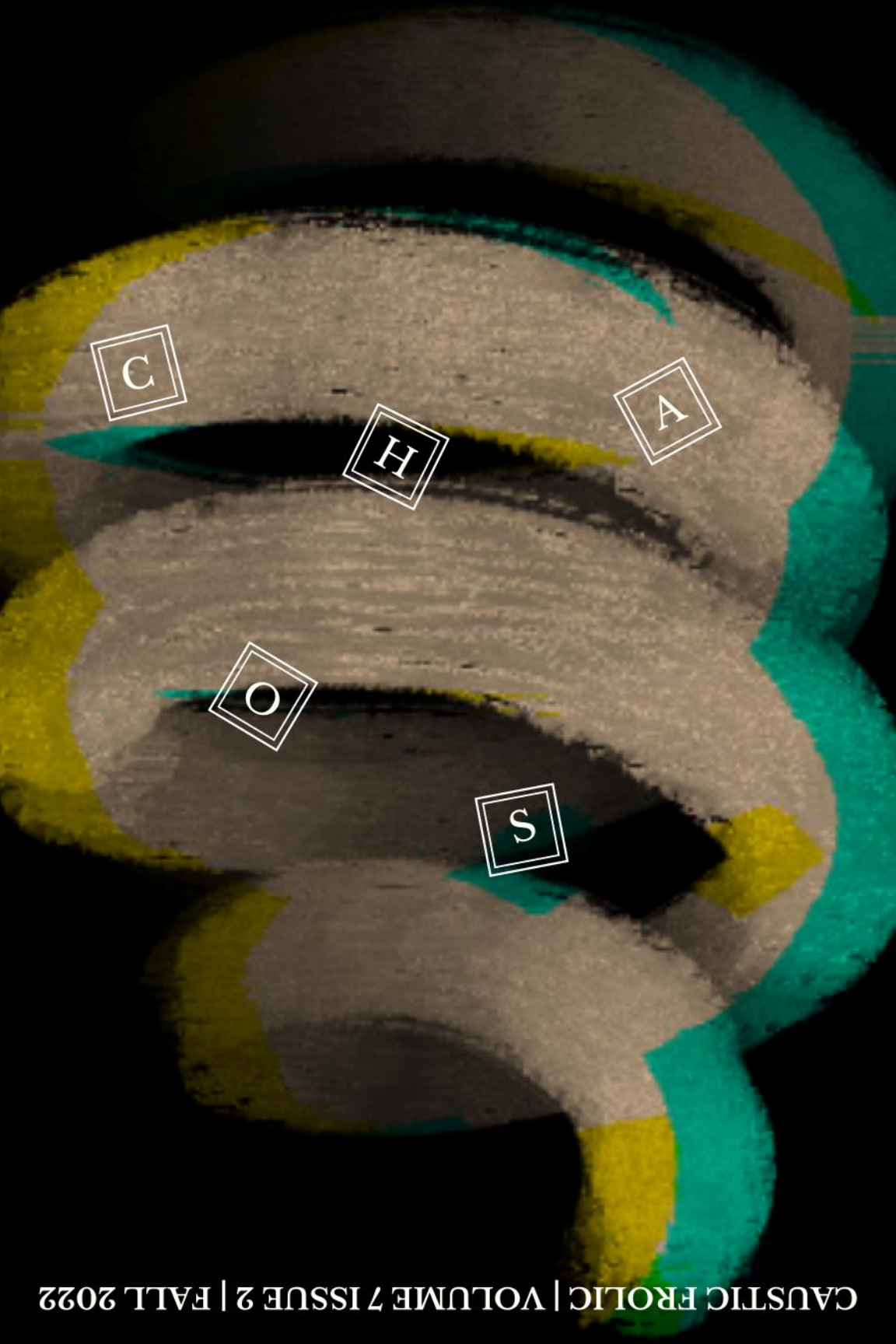
Order and Chaos - How would we know what light was if darkness didn't exist?

By Emma Kendall

21.5cm width x 28cm height, biro, pencil, and highlighter pens



I graduated from Textile Design at Bucks New Uni UK with a 1st in 2016. I went straight to London to pursue a career in design, aiming to intern with a big designer fashion brand, and then work my way up from the bottom. Quickly I became disillusioned with the fashion world and my place within it, and trained to be a personal trainer, so that I could continue my own freelance artistic practice on the side. Before and between Covid lockdowns I painted several murals, before I succumbed to the temptation to 'get a normal job' and my creative artistic practices have been put on the back burner. I was inspired by Caustic Frolic's call for submission email to have a spontaneous crack at drawing again, especially since the theme resonated significantly with my interests in this crazy time. Thank you Caustic Frolic for your work and this brief, giving me the inspiration to draw again!



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