



THE PRAIRIE REVIEW

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GRASSROOTS MAGAZINE OF POETRY, PROSE, ART AND CRITICISM



CHARLES BAUDELAIRE

THE PRAIRIE REVIEW

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JACK & CHRIS GEIERSBACH

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GIDGETTE NATASHA

DEBRA RODRIGUEZ



Letter from the Editor

Welcome to the 15th issue of The Prairie Review!

The cover portrait of Charles Baudelaire is inspired by rediscovery (yet again) of the uncanny depth and range of his thinking, as much as it is also a token of my ongoing appreciation of his lasting impact on later writers and poetic practice since his untimely passing on August 31 in 1867. Perhaps, it would be easier to assume that Baudelaire has been solved as dark, pessimistic, obscene. I think Baudelaire continues to have much to tell us that is insightful, transformative, and I dare say: good.

I am deeply grateful to welcome so many quality submissions to the magazine. Please, take time reading and discovering your personal favorites. I am especially intrigued by the father-son artistic collaboration on "Headless Horseman" and the outstanding literary work by David Booth in his collection *Tell Me Please, What is the Matter*.

In the coming months, it is my plan to include past issues of The Prairie Review on the magazine's website and to begin printed editions. On the project front, a group of us poets in and around Chicago who were coming together to performed for the past three years or so, have recorded an album. The album will be available later this Fall with the accompanying chapbook. Please, stay tuned for information on downloads, purchases, and local performances.

Kinga Lipinska

Editor



**“DO YOU RISE
FROM BLACK CHASM
OR
DESCEND
FROM THE STARS?”**

- CHARLES BAUDELAIRE

POEM BY JACK GEIERSBACH
PHOTO MONTAGE BY CHRIS GEIERSBACH

HEADLESS HORSEMAN



THE HEADLESS HORSEMAN

I knew a land
Where songs were like poems
And where poems dripped like tears
From memories called clouds

Where reality
Is only your imagination
Yet where anything you dreamed
Instantly became true

Where consciousness
Was but a lucid painting
Melting on the horizon
And where the unconscious
Was the only place of any sanctuary

A land where
The further you got from your destination
The closer you got to your destiny

Where time both stood still
And vacillated forward and backward
Simultaneously

Where speech could not be heard
And where only sound and babbling innuendo
Were the methods for communicating
What would only, and always,
Be misunderstood, anyway

Where pain was only in the mind
Where the mind was intangible to control
Where decisiveness was a fatal move
And where hesitation
got you to the answer the quickest

Where the flowing sounds of a harmonica
Become taunting rants, and never-ending
So extreme, yet so serene
Where, whatever you pen to paper
Morphs into, and becomes, the landscape

Where the more you wanted something
The slipperier it got

Where the less desirable a situation was
The more likely it would become
Like tightly fitting clothing
Painted on you like a tattoo
That was indelible, yet invisible
To you, but glaring to everyone else

Where only the blind could see
And only the deaf could speak
And where only the unlearn-ed
Could solve complex issues
Where the more knowledge you gained
The less likely you were to win at any game

Where objects in the distance
I can clearly see

But as I approach them
They only become more out of focus

And that land was like a maze
With no walls and no floor
Nothing to bind you- but your own fear and trepidation
Where only innocent babies could find their way
For once the air, and the surroundings, and thought, and relationships and goals- spawned
There would be no chance at existence for anyone aged past the newborn state

And this land
Seems so real
And my dreams they make no sense
And the less I think about the past
The further from the future I seem to get

And the land only seems to disintegrate
When I try to step upon it
Yet I float around freely
As though the ground were solid
However elusive it may be

Where the body
becomes the soul, which
becomes the air, which
becomes the dust, which
begets a newborn babe

Will there ever come a time
Where things become clear once again?

POEM BY JACK GEIERSBACH
PHOTO MONTAGE BY CHRIS GEIERSBACH

Or are things clearer now
Than they will ever be again
Shall I relish and embrace
The state, and land, that I am in?
For maybe this is heaven
And hell is the reality
Of all future consciousness

How real, this land, it seemed
But what is real
And what is only dreamed?
This land, so surreal
But nothing ever seemed
More alive
And more real

This land- It is Here
And Now
And Not in my mind...but tangible
or...?

Go ask the headless horseman
He knows everything
Yet, curiously, speaks not a word

ON DOBSON AVE

Little Davie set his home on fire
while looking for his shoes to go out and play
Little Davie searched everywhere and under the crib
for his shoes

Searched under the crib where his little
baby brother slept, little baby brother still
where his mother left him for
a few hours to go to work

Alone with Little Davie who lived across the street
where we watched the smoking burning brick building
the lights, the red fire engine truck, the white and blue paddy wagon
the neighbors gathering, my father holding me close

As I pointed to the building where Little Davie lived
who hit me with a rock above my eye just the week before
the scar remains today just above my right eye
Where we watched fire hose water rushing into the basement window

White sulfur smoke billows easy from the Superior Match Company
Just a few feet behind where Little Davie lived
where matchbook rejects can be found on the ground

Where we watched his mother come home from work
the race of races to save a life
with wails and screams in unison with sirens...
Just above the right eye the scar remains today

97 CALLS - MENTAL HEALTH ANGUISH (EPISTLE)

I count at least 97 times you called in anguish
Screaming out your need for help
But accepting none
I am forced to accept that I can provide
None
until you are ready
That's what They tell me

And so i lean on prayer and the support of
Our angels and ancestors and gods and spirit
Guides collectively
To bring you light and a path forward
From the darkness that causes you pain

Me pain while I stand on the other end
Of that tunnel you can't see through

97 calls

With my hand stretched out to you
Wanting to grab and yank you through
Shake you til you come to my senses of
Understanding

97 calls

Should you want to live on
And
prime the pump of life to share your awesome gifts

Bestowed upon you even before birth
97 or and even more

Times my heart breaks into a million helpless pieces
That may never match the number that your heart
Breaks a day
97 times at least and counting

REALITY

Quietly...

Interlocked flesh pellets

Molded together by the ancient

hands of time

Deserve special commemoration

by the idiotic forces of life

Tangled vibrations of matter

transfer themselves

periodically

Creating mountains upon mountains

of hideous poker playing cards

held tightly behind old hands

of dusty possessions belonging to

a midnight madness

Forever knowing cherry blue

emotions

Intertwined majestically

around timid blushed lovers

Down in a valley that runs

Along the paper clipped

border of reality

WATCHING

Black maple drops on the jazz label making sweet sounds

Treble bass clef

All over the page and me

Smile while watching this dance of my people

Last April warm and true

Black Angel at the table

Warm and true almost like

The blues

When hearts are trampled down

Like real practical in its truest

Nature

Like tactical pain with a green leaf

Wrapped around the girl the sister

And her audience, including me

Watching with

Saccades

HOW MY PARENTS MEET

The story of love is the dream that writes me into the world,
her dream and his dream coincide. I am born
from her sea foam, from fragments blown into wind,
from his prairie grass hands
and boots that straddle two continents.

She swims across an ocean,
as he waits along the shore, eyes searching the frothy violence
of water as it bends to crush the sand.

He remembers the color of her dress, the blithe elegance
of her step. She remembers the knot in his tie,
how she straightened it as he held her body to his,
he is her land. She steps ashore, the briny smell familiar,
but this has never happened before.

Life begins for them here.
I watch them as they turn to walk away.
She, in her green dress, and he, in his uniform.
I see them as they disappear into the high grass of summer,
listen to the hills in her voice, his Midwestern prairie.

As the ocean flows away from the coast,
the tethered boats rising and falling with the moon
I know I may not see them again as they are,
I know this will never happen again.

BEFORE SHE WAS PARIS

If you are a poet, you will see clearly that Paris is floating
In this sheet of paper...

Before she was Paris
 she was farmland,
 she was tall grasses,
damp rocks covered with moss.

She was the shade
 under a weeping willow
 she was starlight

in a midnight sky--
which should have tipped
someone off—
 before she
 was Paris.

And when she was a lavender twilight
 her breath could stop a heart,
 her voice clear as the peal
of the Angelus bells.

She is still the cigarette
 smoke of her mother
 the sawdust in her father's
 throat, she is scotch on the rocks,
 the Lalique goddess on a Cadillac's hood,
Her Nibs, Contrary Mary, and Lady Jane.

She suspects she's been so much else
before she was Paris.

DEMOISELLE

A suitcase full of frayed dresses,
too worn to wear,
I still have them.

College days, I would sit drinking
bitter coffee and reading Flaubert

It was as if I had never seen the horizon
before—I was lonely and loved.

The thin rim between sky and water
my dreams slipped over, disappeared into mist

I bought a pack of cigarettes at the local tabac,
walked home to my dorm, smoking.

Why, in recollection, is the air so chill
and the sky the color of Athena's eyes?

I put the cigarettes on the dresser, lie
in bed almost the whole afternoon

Looking out the window. The brief moment
the light of day disappears, shadows fade

The thoughts of the girl who inhabited me,
who hadn't the need to say anything sad yet.

UNNATURAL KIND

I want things to happen quickly
All coiled up
Springing forth
Not the gentle unfolding of a true nature
I am the unnatural kind

In early term I was
Conceived of the world
Not above it
In the heart ache, and burnt ends that engulf
In fits and screams
Half found out
Left to finish my own growth stages

I speak and talk to every specimen I find
I love you all more than season's can spell
Yet I hate
This quixotic nature, is without rest and quiet
So I search, neverending it seems
In rivers, cushions, and quiet mornings

Hoping the meeting of the triumvirate will find me

Can a person such as me be found?
When time, with its gentle gaze has looked away
Twisted and curled, overly oxygenated, I sit

So I ask, spring forth life
Bring me your rocky turns and unfixed curls
Just bring it quick
I am of the unnatural kind
Let those of the crumpled sort find me
Let me be found out in the waiting

Am I fixed, or unfixed
A tax on the world or a mold ready made
Which frightens me more

It is hard to contain
All the quick stops and sudden starts
Though I will keep stirring, watchful for any signs of a curdle
For beyond all, I am fond of this self
As I am fond of you, friend

BOOK REVIEW: DAVID BOOTH *TELL ME PLEASE, WHAT'S THE MATTER*

Tell Me Please, What's the Matter is a new collection of poems and prose by David Booth, available through Blue Cedar Press. Booth blurs distinctions between art and autobiography transforming each text in the book into a unique literary landscape well worth exploring. The work is rich with cultural and historical allusions, diverse poetic perceptions, and intentional creativity. *Tell Me Please, What's the Matter* presents both as a work of art and an apologia for art.

The collection prioritizes mystery, curiosity, and artistic exploration above any sense of control or forced certainty. David Booth draws inspiration from John Keats's practice of negative capability to value ambiguity and the pursuit of beauty in his own work and the result is simply wonderful. References to Shelley's *A Defense of Poetry*, Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria*, and Keats (among others) show Booth's thoughtful consideration of writing, poetics, and the vocation of the poet. Yet the collection is not at all confined to conceptual considerations or academic exercise in literary theory. Instead, while erudite, the book is above all visually inventive and full of fascinating, aesthetically provoking writing. Atypical typography and layout add stimulus to the reading experience. The collection is non-linear and multi-directional providing multiple entry points, alternative alignments, and shape poems.

Every piece in the book is noteworthy, but if anyone insists on starting points, I'll list the following "Broken Stirrup," "Euphemisms for Seasonal Affective Disorder," "Mood for a Day," "Reading Plato in Memory of Mary Oliver" as well as "Some Boys: Bylaws for a Boy's Clubhouse."

Overall, David Booth adopts the *New Masculine* lens both stylistically and conceptually through flexibility, range, curiosity, amiability, and relatability making *Please Tell Me, What's the Matter*, a truly outstanding compilation of writings. The collection is encyclopedic in themes and poetic strategies and makes for a very satisfying creative reading experience. Please enjoy two excerpts from David Booth's poems on the following pages and consider purchasing the book.

One What we celebrate here
 We must do out there.

Two We are hungry
 But let none of us be exclusive.
 We won't have just perfect people.
 No one besides Kendrick Lamar is perfect
 When he sings, "Don't give up, I won't give up."¹⁴
 Though we don't know what other people believe
 We don't ask of anyone, "Are you worthy?"

Three We are here because someone loves us
 And whispers like Irenaeus
 "The glory of God is a human being fully alive."¹⁵

Can we at least try to say this once a week?
To ourselves? To at least one visitor?

- David Booth
Excerpt from *Some Boys*
Bylaws for a Boys' Clubhouse

Robert Lax on Patmos. James Joyce used to talk about writing as if you were sending a telegram and each word cost so much in the beginning. What you start aiming for. I am against driving myself crazy so let them grow the way trees grow and don't dig for them unless you're willing to deal with the regret that comes with trying. Dreams emerge this way. Packed with meaning they surface perfectly free without your coaxing,

I run smackdab into Today,
someone I fear is lying.

Once you give that a poem flows with you, what you become regular about is sitting down every so often to write. May you encourage the poem to join the flow authenticating itself within you like private benedictions. May the flow grow naturally into what you want to say to everyone. How often does anyone tell you in all honesty never to stop doing what you're doing for the sake of others' edification? Forming the habit of working on a project all the time now, good moments arise by themselves as happy surprises, not to mention graces. We must put ourselves in good graces to receive them. All this doing to manifest yourself in writing.

- David Booth

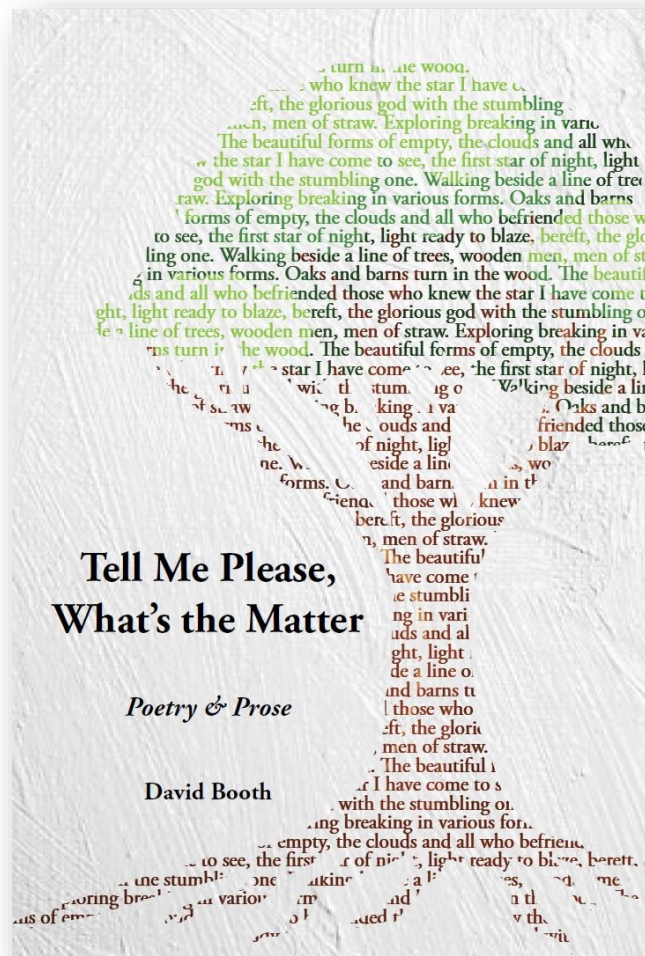
Excerpt from *I Am Against Driving Myself Crazy*

You may purchase the book here:

Publisher's site: [Tell Me Please, What's the Matter – Blue Cedar Press](#)

Bookshop.org link: [Tell Me Please, What's the Matter? a book by David Booth, Vivienne Legg, and Catherine Brady - Bookshop.org US](#)

The book is also available online through usual providers such as Amazon and Barnes & Noble.



David Booth is the author of two books of prose and poetry, *Tell Me Please, What's the Matter* (2025) and *Too Bright to See* (2021). His work has appeared in Chicago Quarterly Review, Cerasus, Missouri Review, Fourteen Hills, Transfer, and Washington Square. The M.I.T. Press published his scholarly work about civic participation. He blogs at www.sacredpedestrians.com. A high school humanities teacher, he lives in San Francisco with his wife Ingrid Hawkinson.

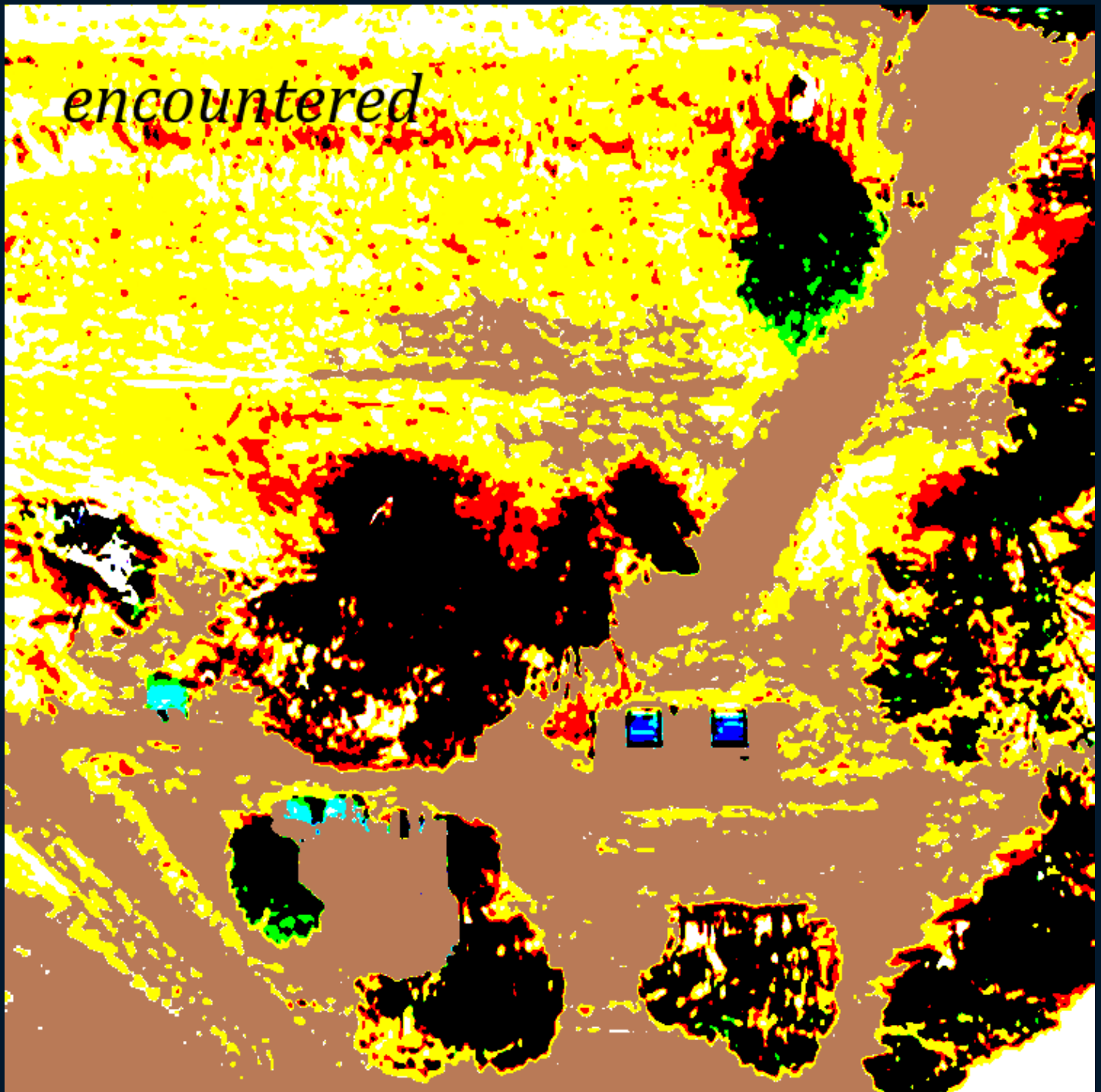
geographies: Jeperit



Note on the visuals:

Three of the visuals are digital manipulations of images found on the web, & include two of my on-going *geographies* series. I have taken to including snippets of text in these which, if they aren't titles, bear little relevance to the titles, like a significant portion of my text poetry. The fourth visual included could be loosely described as being part of an occasional pseudo-Mondrian outing.

geographies: Sheep Hills



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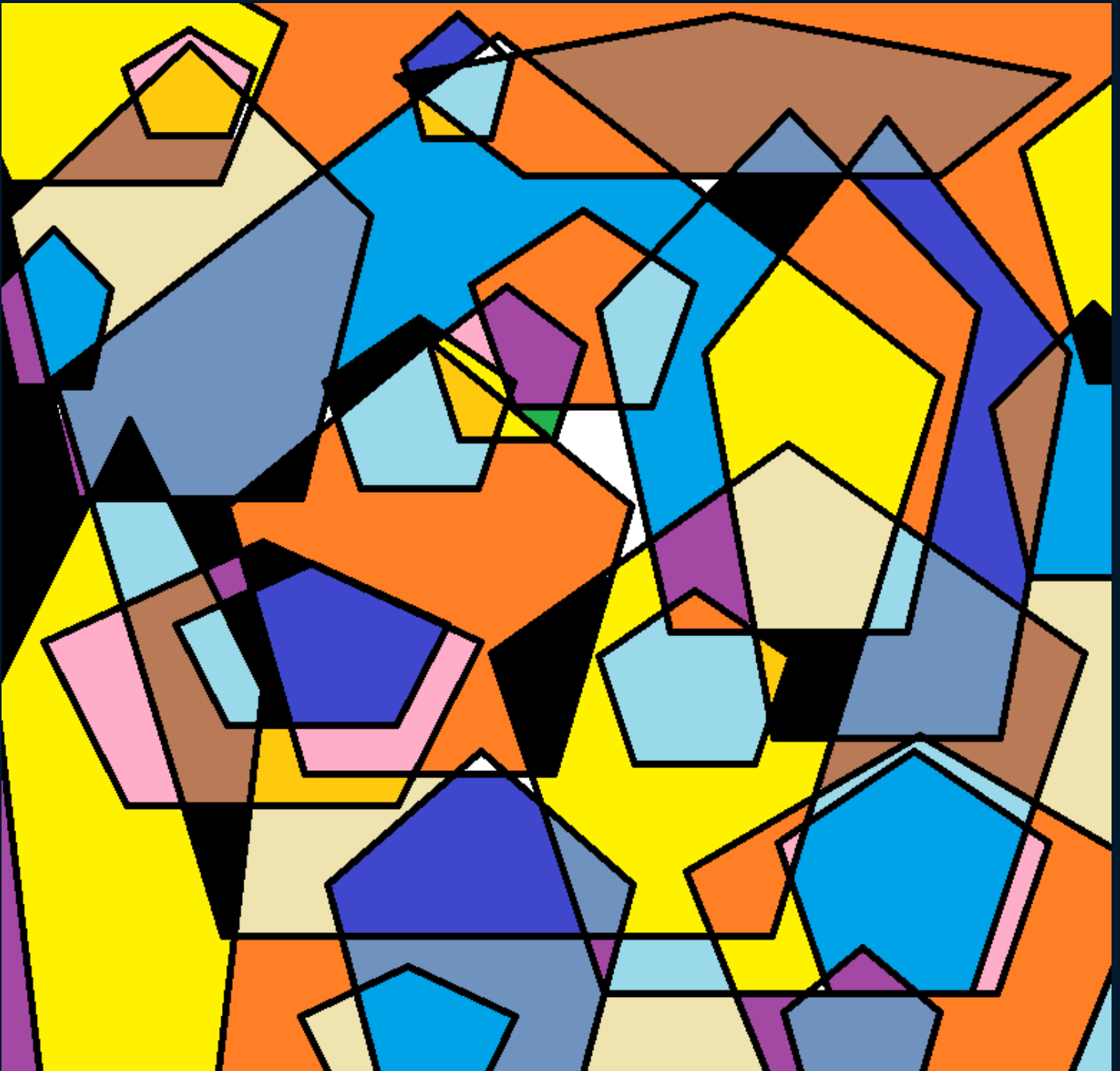
caveat



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be held accountable 4



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LETHE

Since I
no longer have
memorized
the ways
in which
words fit
Together

it is with
some effort
that I
manage to
get these
few down.

& now they
are before
me I cannot
remember
what they
mean.

THE FUMIGATOR

was meant to
pay their annual visit
today. Canceled. A BIG
TERMITE JOB IN MT.
MORGAN. I wonder
what it is, have visions
of termites EATING
UP THE HOUSE. The
phrase spins around
in my brain. Heat up
pasta for lunch
settle down to EAT UP
big & watch TV. But.
Crap crap crap crap crap
EATING UP THE HOUSE.
So no TV. Silence except
for EATING, shifting
from a Streisand song
to rap rap rap rap. EATIN'
UP DAH HOUSE. I break
my way outside. Kooka-
burra on the clothesline.
EATING UP THE HOUSE
I say to it with my
rap inflexion perfected by
rap-petition. Pervert
infliction scoffs the cat
who has one eye on the bird
& the other on the main
chance in the shape of a
lizard. The bird is silent
until I turn to go in-
side. WHO LET THE DOG
OUT? UH UH adds the cat.

INCLEMENCY

Hat turned up
against the
weather or was it
heat turned up
against the
winter or was it
heathens turning
up to support
the sinner or
was it the search
& rescue heli-
copter finally
turning up to
winch me out of
this inescapable
maelstrom I've
found myself in.

A YOUTUBE FUGUE

The sound
of the cell-
phone capture is
somewhat tinny;
but opportunities
of seeing / hearing
the patriarch of
the Bach family
performing on a
well-tempered
clavier with
his offspring
providing the
backing band
are, needless
to say, few
& far between
& this is
therefore
a welcome
addition
to the canon.

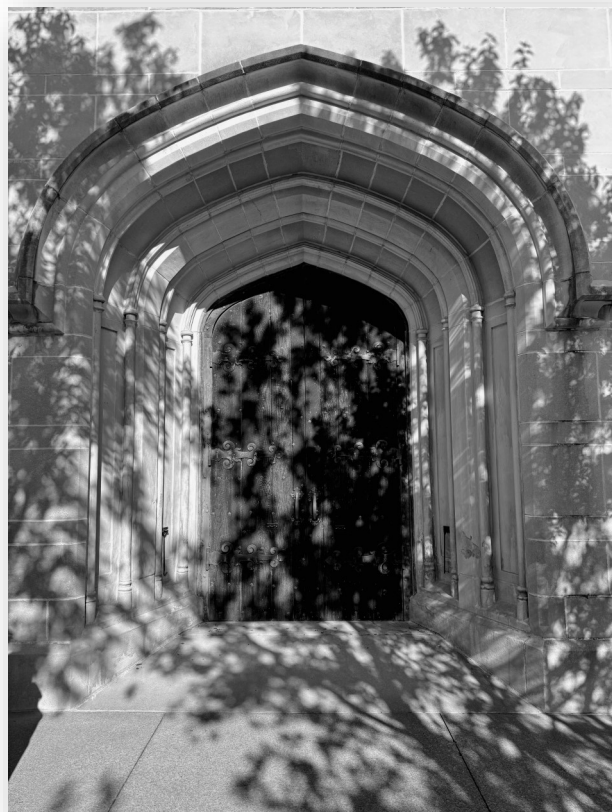
THOMAS MERTON ON POETRY: SILENCE BETWEEN WORDS

A few weeks ago, I attended a three-day retreat focused on creative and spiritual renewal through poetry and contemplation. The retreat was inspired by the legacy of Thomas Merton, the renowned French-American monk, writer, photographer, and poet. Though Merton passed away in 1968, his reflections on spiritual / inner life, contemplative practice, and poetry continue to draw seekers and writers alike. This retreat yielded many fruitful insights, especially around Merton's understanding of silence and poetry, which deeply resonated with my own ideas on the potential value of silence for writing and on the potency of language as expression rather than (mere) communication.

Poetry dwells in the tensions or even contradictions between art and life, the external and the internal, and the perennial conflict between the need for community and the need for solitude to fully process experiences and ideas. Merton suggests that silence enables poets to navigate these tensions and prepares them to dive more effectively into the oceanic depths of life that are overwhelming and even terrifying. This navigation process is silence as attunement to the deepest layers of experience, silence as attentiveness, silence as vulnerability and openness to the other.

Poetry also stands as the sort of guardian of language—poetic use of language can be a redemptive practice that reveals aspects of life that are too complex to name, describe, or - especially - solve. This 'looking over' over language is a means of safeguarding against a merely transactional or superficial use of words. Merton would point to growing sense of alienation as one of the malevolent symptoms of the commodified and prescriptive use of language. Such harmful and limiting commodification of language (and of reality) is especially evident in political and economic practices.

KINGA LIPINSKA



A very important distinction between Merton and, for example, modern theorists of language such as Wittgenstein or perhaps Bataille, is that for Merton language is one of the capacities to witness reality as it is at its core. And for Merton, at this core is Life inseparable from Love. For Wittgenstein or Bataille, that core might be play, game, void, or even pure chance – like in Mallarme’s seminal “Throw of the Dice” poem. Whatever the core might be from a metaphysical or linguistic standpoint, it is generally thought that poetry as poetry is here to guard *against* the confining of language to any particular edition of political-market-economic-power jargon as also to guard against the disintegration of its expressive potency.

With growing concerns about the cognitive dissonance between various facets of power and the innate human impulse for compassion, care, and desire for interpersonal communion, the role of poetry becomes ever more vital. To this end, Merton would have emphasized the importance of a disinterested (powerless) practice of poetry – the giving and overflowing aspect of spilling your soul (or your heart or your guts) to try and to have and keep yourself free, alive and kicking. It is precisely by spilling over that you can remain intact for some reason. Another tension to explore.

The vulnerability and stamina needed for poetic expression is honed through the craft of writing. All the same, poetry is never just writing. Or just speaking. The vitality of language depends not only on what is said, but on the capacity to hear, listen, and be silent. Poetry is the fruit and flower of listening, hearing, speaking, and silence. Silence is a form of attentiveness that is the ground of all writing. Very often silence is thought of as entirely passive, but this is not the case for poets like Merton. Here, silence is the foundation of self-centering and as such becomes a contemplative practice and thus an engine for creative work.

Finally, there is the question of self and identity. Let's move past theoretical discussion of what a self might be directly to poetic practice. It is in poetic practice that *self* finds a captivating expression and therefore a captivating reality. The unity of the self, realized in what is commonly called the *poetic voice*, is a treasure in any climate marked by fragmentation, disintegration, displacement, and alienation. Poetic voice or poetic self is a coherent, comprehensive, creative, and crafted response to full range of experience, whether societal or personal. It is fundamentally limitless, because while, for example, economy or science will have trouble assuming poetry into their particular realms, poetry will have no trouble assuming, digesting, and regurgitating them as art and as judgment fueled by introspective and careful consideration. Poetry is, therefore, the practice of passing from generation to generation, between individuals and communities, of the flame of a human-centered experience of life in all its richness, contradiction, strife, and fragility. As such, poetry is a document of life that never expires.

In any modern first world society, a poet necessarily occupies a marginal position – this has not changed since the times of Charles Baudelaire. Yet, it is precisely this marginality that allows the poet to transcend the bitter confines of various oppressive structures and to express the fullest range of the lived human experience.

BY THEN

We know all when we are born,
the perfect brain and body, spirit, too,
then we iterate. But with luck
in the time when time speeds past,
the clouds part some, a beam of sun
of what we were comes through
and we remember who we are.
Parents fall away, we come out to play
again, and when it rains,
our suit is waterproof by then.

FOIBLES

There is play in all poetic forms.
Why not in relationships
or in things we take on to do
or learn or love?

So serious some humans,
self-important, austere,
and what they fear
was taught in catechism
or parents' wisdom taken to heart.

Distressing, partaking of tragedy
more potent than Shakespeare's parables
is how some care what others think
more than truth or experience.

Thus prison doors shut 'round the mind
and spirit to ether fades
if the poet descends into banal hell
and the devil comes out to play.

*Editor Ron Padgett of The Handbook of
Poetic Forms says "there is playfulness in all poetic forms."*

DOWNSIZING

The secret is not to stop collecting
nor to let go of excess things
from another's viewpoint,
if they give us a pretty glow.

Nor is the secret to banish things
or pictures from one's life,
the college roommates, the bridesmaids,
a Boy Scout's first knife.

Pale memories these are not,
nor do they leech our will,
but mark a journey through the years
and the moments that have thrilled.

Preserve things in photographs
then happily let go,
some objects passed on to those in need
or clothing we outgrow.

There's no heartache in the memories
that nurture and give joy,
nor will I wither like the plant
whose roots are all destroyed.

Comes time for thing or human
or season to pass on,
I'll sit in silence and search for peace—
remembering their song.

WITH

We are conjoin
the “with” of everything,
the now (not “to be”),
a single thought we double be
but of one basic soul.
We are not the anger-bled
abyss of devil’s dread
but feathered friends
who combine at last
to take up giddy flight.
We are flow as wet demands,
the thick plum falls into our hands,
the darkest raven leaves at last
while we light up the land.
as One.

Ann Grogan is a joyful octogenarian who after a 58-year gap took up re-learning to play her piano. She's retired from two careers, one in fashion corsetry and one in consumer rights trial law after which she discovered there is definitely life after law.

CHICAGO SUMMER

The sprinkler is humming
To the chartreuse green lawn again
The soft hush hush, spurt spurt song
Sweat collecting drops on overheated skin
Catching the ripe funky funk of musky armpits
While the battered ice cream truck
Is parked playing Music Box Dancer again
We are waiting for the heat wave to abate
Your neighbor bought a lime popsicle
Dusted with chamoy spice
Steamy air compressing your brain
Like a pop up sponge
Delicious breezes are sweeping
Cold showers trickle relief
Going to the dog beach with my mixed breed
While pure breed yellow labs linger in the lake
Waiting, you are late again at the Music Box
So we can hold hands in the dark
Walk home together in the dark
With the fireflies sharing incandescent light
Kiss you softly this Chicago night
Taste the salt from the popcorn you consumed

ACHE

You are the French bread
I am the unsalted butter
Twenty kisses in your text today love
We had big dreams with no plans
Your embraces made me stronger
I know you were my everything
She pierced your heart with a skewer
Placed you in a takeaways box
The great puppet master
Outwitting me once again
You are the French bread
I am the unsalted butter
Twenty kisses in your text today love
Aching for your sweetness now
Tried to free you with my genuine love, tenderness
Saying earnest prayers and love spells
So much time passed, no more trains running
Had to take my solitary walk
My passion, my devotion is assured
Like a tattoo over my head I won't remove
So chilling how we melted away
Called your name, so hot and achy all over
You were the bearer of my ecstasy
Tried to be your best lover
You are the French bread
I am the unsalted butter
Exorcising you like a demon
From the chambers of my heart

DEBRA RODRIGUEZ



DEBRA RODRIGUEZ



MOMENTS

It's been decades since we played tag
Enjoyed sleepovers and dismissal bells
Laughed at dad's jokes, craved carvel
And savored mom's best cake- marcel

The weddings came and went, and children grew
We visit grandmom's grave with heavy hearts
Wishing to try again her famous stew
And feel like grandkids once more, too

Our friends leave early after dinner
We spend more time in parks than bars
Our hair got a little thinner
But that's ok, we're still rock -stars

Enjoy each moment spent with loved ones
Don't let those moments pass in vain
While waiting for the overwhelming,
defining moment of your reign

Take pleasure in a cup of tea,
the morning breeze and someone's smile
Kid's laugh, your partner's look, sweet text file
And those books you've meant to read for a while

And make that phone call, take that trip,
Do camping, swimming, music and all
Keep your eyes focused on the ball no mater how big or small
From very first moment till the last fall

THE CITY THAT DOESN'T EXIST

Again the silence, quiet night, and thoughts are pouring in
I dream of a city far away, the city I've never been
It maybe rains or snows there or maybe trees are green
Anyway, the endless hope is warming me up like dopamine

I see the city far away, it doesn't yet exist
A stranger finds a shelter there and those who gone are missed
The cats, and dogs, and horses are loved, and kids are hugged and kissed
And all the people and the creatures are happy to co-exist

A hearth is burning there with eternal flame
For you and me and everyone who came
No matter if you're wild or tame, or what your last name or your fame
A hearth is burning just the same, without a blame or shame

It's not my fate to know what destiny predicts
I walk to find forgotten truth and maybe a few bricks
I'll bring those bricks into the city as a symbol of my fit
Who knows how long the journey is, but I will get there bit by bit

And day by day I may confuse a trace
But I keep going without losing my face
And the last step seems like a lifetime away
I still see the city that yet doesn't exist, far away

GIDGETTE NATASHA

GIDGETTE NATASHA IS A MULTI-HYPHENATE ARTIST BASED IN LONG ISLAND, NY, WHOSE WORK CENTERS AROUND VISUAL COMMUNICATION. WITH A CREATIVE SPIRIT AND A DEEP UNDERSTANDING OF ART HISTORY, GIDGETTE NATASHA HOLDS A MASTER OF ARTS DEGREE IN ART HISTORY AND A BACHELOR OF FINE ARTS IN VISUAL COMMUNICATION. INFLUENCED BY NATURE, SPIRITUALITY AND METAPHYSICS, HER PIECES OFTEN DRAW INSPIRATION FROM THE RICH SYMBOLISM AND AESTHETIC OF ANCIENT EGYPT. THROUGH A BLEND OF MODERN TECHNIQUES AND ANCIENT CONCEPTS, NATASHA'S WORK INVITES VIEWERS TO CONTEMPLATE THE CONNECTIONS BETWEEN THE PAST AND PRESENT, AND THE INTERPLAY OF THE PHYSICAL AND METAPHYSICAL WORLDS. HER THOUGHT-PROVOKING CREATIONS ARE A TESTAMENT TO HER INNOVATIVE APPROACH AND ACADEMIC BACKGROUND.

GIDGETTE NATASHA



GIDGETTE NATASHA



GIDGETTE NATASHA



GIDGETTE NATASHA



THE DIASPORA

I'm somewhere between "Lost" and "Found"
If there is a state of purgatory that exists
I often find myself battling my choices
I want almost nothing to do with my culture
Yet everything I have is a result of sacrifice

I exist on American soil
But I find parts of me missing amongst my peers
The blood in my veins, this heart that beats
It exists in Yugo, a land that once was
I feel at home in the mountains, in the Balkans

The Balkans wouldn't recognize me
I'm far too American to be considered nashi (our people)
Simultaneously, I'm far too nashi in a group of Americans
So where do I belong?
If there even is a place for me at all

Raised in a home where Yugo was all I knew
Part of an American system that churned out capitalistic values
I value neither — not being American, not having to survive late stage capitalism
I despise the old school customs I was raised under too
I value personal freedom while coexisting amongst community

Yet I wonder, do I value freedom as a form of escapism?
Am I really committing to community if I find flaws amongst both cultures that cause me
to drift?

Am I too black and white with my thinking?
Both avoidant and attached
I create distance and crave a seat at every table

I exist in this odd space of never being enough of either culture
Yet at the same time, being far too much of both cultures
How do I begin to reckon with that state of being?
Is it possible to accept both as is?
Perhaps, both realities do exist at the same time

“Two wolves live inside of me,” as they say
I’m just another first generation kid
Uncertain, confused, always searching for a fleeting feeling of “home”
But I have yet to understand the concept
That home begins with me

QUESTIONS UNANSWERED

What was your childhood like?
Did you get to live out parts of your dreams?
Or were they silenced by cultural expectations of what a woman should become?

Were you sad to leave?
All your friends, the only family you had, the place that you knew to the core, all were
left behind
Or was your ego too motivated to be a “man” and carry on the family legacy?

Did you ever have any doubts?
When the jobs didn’t pan out, degree unrecognized, names changed, personal tensions
escalated
Were you aching to return back to familiar?

Was time found to celebrate how far you’ve come?
Despite the obstacles and the challenges, you both created the American dream
Did you feel a sense of accomplishment?

When things went south, did you regret leaving?
American culture is too fast-paced, far less family oriented, far more independent than
either of you fathomed
Was it hard to adapt?

What kept you both together?
Certainly it was not the healthiest love
Perhaps some parts of cultural shame wouldn’t allow you to separate

Was it because you both left together?
And that shared experience could not be understood by most?
Perhaps staying together was the only way to remember your roots

Why were you easier on me than your daughter?
Was it easier to control whether she followed the path chosen for our women for decades?
Or were you both simply worn down and tired by the time I became “of age” myself?

Did you think you would raise a granddaughter?
Your son died, your daughter had too many issues, your ex-son-in-law became a ghost
Was I the only family you both had too?

I begin to ask myself:
Why was Baba always angry?
Why didn't Dedo step in more often?
Why did Mama strangle me?
Why did Vujko have to go?

Who was my father?

Am I like any of you?

Dedo, did you know you would die first?
Did you know in order to keep me safe, you had to provide me a way to escape after
you had passed?
Was it hard to accept that your daughter and your wife had harmed your granddaugh-
ter so much?

Baba, do you see now why I had to leave?
Why I had no desire to see you on your deathbed?
Did you ever reflect on the pain you carried and then inflicted on others?

Mama, will you ever grow up?
You are still alive, you can get help
Part of me will silently plea until you're six feet under

Father, will you ever take accountability?
You had a role too, you willingly married someone else who did not want me
You cannot come back now that you're divorced again

Vujko, are you proud of me?
Did you have dreams of your own unfulfilled?
I selfishly wish you were still around

Baba, Dedo, did you know when you left that it would all pan out like this?
I am carrying generations of grief alone
I am finding the good in our culture where I can
As much as I was failed, as much as you both tried things differently
I know you both did what you thought was best

Did you both love me?

“Gubre skapana,” (rotten garbage)
My grandma often said to me as she cut me a bowl of fruit

On one hand, she never supported my dreams as they didn’t align with what she wanted
On the other hand, where would I be without her?

“Slusaj na Baba ti,” (listen to your grandma)
My grandpa would often say to me in front of her presence

Our conversations without her present were much more joyful and supportive
I began to understand that he was scared of her, too

The turbulence of their lives is truly something out of a novel
After all, they carried the weight of their entire family on their shoulders by immigrating

I’d be nowhere without the risks taken and the labor provided by them
Even if they both had enormous flaws that our culture refuses to acknowledge

In many ways, I relate to them both
I didn’t start my life over in a new country, but I did in a new state

After my grandpa died, there was no salvaging my relationship with my grandma
I learned from them, the blueprints, of how to struggle and survive on my own

I like to believe that self-motivation has been passed down for generations
After all, don’t we all seek a life better than the one we came from?

Sure, I labor differently than my grandparents
I didn’t leave my home country due to poverty and a collapsing government – yet

I didn’t grow up in poverty on farmland
Nor did I raise a family, experience the loss of a child, or become the caretakers of a grandchild

But I did start over
I thank them for their labor and the fruits it has given me to do so

In doing so, I am calling attention to all the negativity that our culture refuses to recognize
Hoping that my labor will provide some fruits down the road

SHINING YOUR LIGHT

A SEQUEL TO FINDING YOUR LIGHT

That flicker in the darkness,
that whisper in the storm,
that tiny ember you thought had died
but was only hibernation,
waiting for your breath
to wake it up again.
So you found it.
You found your light.
But finding is just the beginning—
now comes the sacred work
of letting it burn,
of feeding those flames
with all the love you denied yourself,
This is about more than survival now.
This is about thriving.
Your light doesn't belong hidden
under bushels of shame,
doesn't deserve to be dimmed
by voices that told you
you were too much,
too loud,

too bright,
too *everything* they feared to be.
Shine anyway.
Your light is not a candle
that can be blown out by bitter winds—
it is a lighthouse,
a beacon cutting through fog,
a North Star for others
still wandering in their wilderness.
When you shine your light,
you give permission to others
to do the same.
When you speak your truth,
you hand someone else
the keys to their own voice.
When you love yourself fiercely,
you teach the world
what unconditional love looks like.
This healing is not linear
some days your light will blaze
like a summer solstice,
other days it will barely flicker
like a match in the rain.
Both are holy.
Both are enough.

The wounded healer knows
that scars can become constellations,
that broken places
let the light shine through differently,
that your story
all of it,
the ugly parts and the beautiful parts,
the mistakes and the miracles—
is exactly what someone else
needs to hear today.

So shine your light,
not because you have it all figured out,
but because you've decided
to stop figuring it out in the dark.

Shine because healing happens
in the sharing,
in the witnessing,
in the brave act
of showing up as you are.

You are not the wound.
You are the healing.
You are not the darkness.
You are the light
breaking through.
Your light is medicine.

Your healing is contagious.

Your joy is an act of revolution

in a world that profits

from your despair.

The darkness has had you long enough.

It's time to come home

to the light you've always been,

to the brightness

that was never lost,

only waiting

for you to remember

its name.

DESTINY

Destiny, divinity

tell me what you mean to me

closed eyes lead to infinity

my endless possibilites

locked up deep inside of me.

Help me end this suffering

Lead me far away from me

Illusions I can't bear to see

Help me find the real me

Buried deep: divinity.

Deny, deny or why do I

Believe I am my body or someone else's word?

I see dead people have you heard?

Creeping, crawling, wailing, yawning,

pretending to be everything to

everyone, but they can't see they're dead.

Smothering their souls inside

They run away and try to hide,

so they won't have to feel the pain.

A candle running from a flame

Afraid they'll melt and slip away
They live their lives not ever growing
and end up living: but never knowing
about a life pursuing dreams.
How sad and how depressing
They'll never know what they are missing.
Destiny, divinity
Help me, please, be true to me
Cuz when I am, I'm truly free
I AM TRUE DIVINITY
I am one with God: you see.
And then, he co-creates with me.
Destiny, divinity
tell me what you mean to me
closed eyes lead to infinity
my endless possibilites
locked up deep inside of me.

I AM LIGHT

I am light

I am love

I was loved

Into life

A gift from above

To learn to love others and myself: my real life...

my spirit,

filled with boundless love and a bright light

You ask, "How do I begin?"

I begin from within

and I connect with the deepest

part of myself

for doing this connects me

with someone else.

The one who guides me and

shows me my light:

the one who loves me unconditionally

with all of His might.

Together we journey
and access my divinity
He guides me to see
when I embrace the bright light inside me,
I embrace the real me.

I am Light

Next, I ask Him for wisdom to heal
And He guides me to see
The false beliefs I must release to be free.

He says, "It won't be easy, but I'm always here.
I won't leave you alone.
I love you.
Remember, I am your home."

"When empowered,
tell others that they're not alone,
they'll see your bright light
and find me: their real home."

THE OLDEST SEED, *IN FREE VERSE SEPTETS*

The oldest found seed to germinate and become a living plant
Lay quietly in King Herod's palace at Masada
For 2000 years without water or weight or mold or rust
No footprint or animal forager, no bee or fresh earth to comfort
Crush or devour, the date palm kernel avoided all consumption
All corruption, in stillness and integrity, a promise, a gift
Survival, patient waiting for a moment of discovery, planting

Witness to the destruction of the Jews resisting the Romans
Even as the last lamp burning for the Judeans sputtered
Many fled in diaspora across the desert, the Dead Sea
The world, a seed remained with a fertile kernel to nourish
Two millennial ages passing above the silent battlements
When a young hand, gentle in excavation, found intact
Potential, the question of how to water and ignite life again

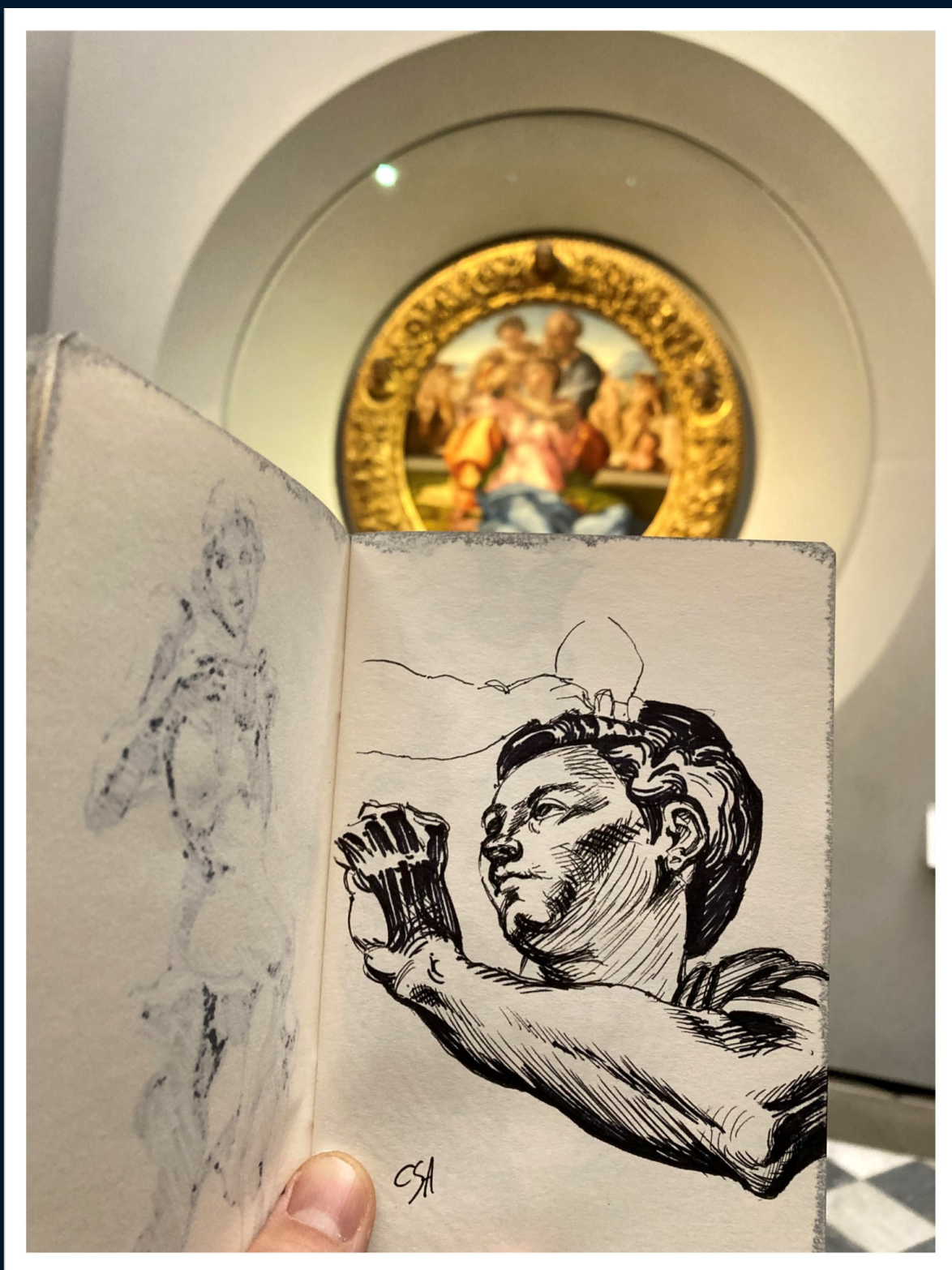
Though palaces and forts may fall and burn, a seed remained
That could nourish the future from clusters of cream flowers
Thrusting a shoot that became a root to the ancient world
There to be found in the waterless dust of tourist tracks in time
As a future only opens in a prayer between generations
Sharing water, sharing bread, sharing wine and charoset
Beside a date palm, under stars that guide us to peace

THE CORN GODDESS

The corn goddess begins gifting the seed
In mud and pain, woman toils in the soil
Nurturing the people for the future
They deny her, accusing her of witchcraft
Driving her away or back into the earth
Where she continues her secret presence
Helping our kind remember how to behave
Not to grind the seed corn, not just to kill
For hunger, but to plant and love in season
Three sisters, corn, beans, and squash

CRISTIAN ALUAS

MUSEUM SKETCHES



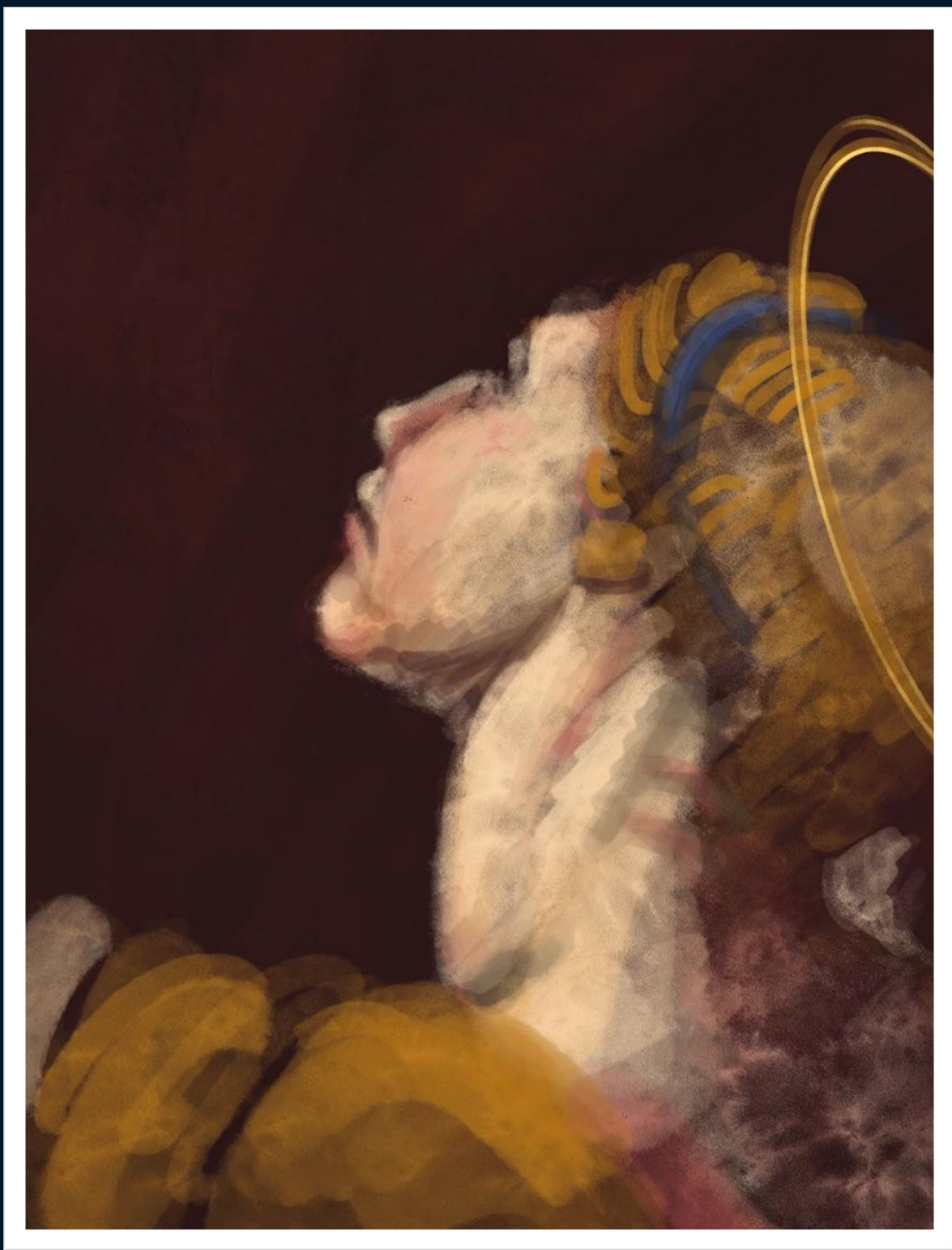
CRISTIAN ALUAS

AFTER MICHELANGELO



CRISTIAN ALUAS

AFTER RAPHAEL



CRISTIAN ALUAS

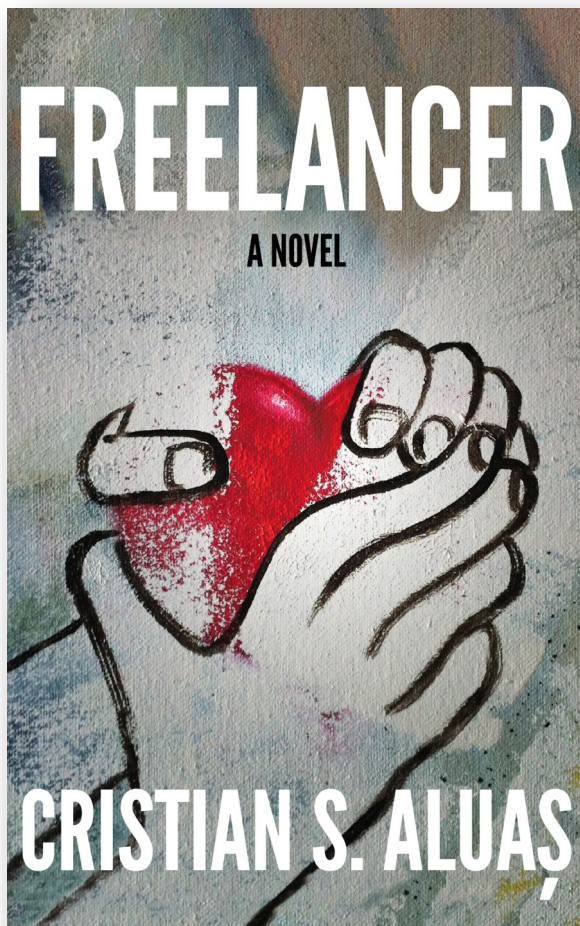
MONTMARTE



CRISTIAN ALUAS

AFTER LACOON





Cristian S. Aluaș is a Romania-born Canadian artist and writer, now residing in Chicago. With a background in animation and creative writing, he has thrived as a freelancer since 2002, earning over a thousand five-star reviews on platforms like Upwork for his work in illustration and comics. He's the creator of the "Big Boss" graphic novel series and author of *IT'S A LIVING: Surviving as a Freelancer in the 21st Century*. He now launches *FREELANCER*, a compelling novel that intertwines his experiences as a freelance artist with a poignant story of ambition, love, and self-discovery.

The book is now available on Amazon.

After sharing a poutine in the Byward Market, we ducked into Cafe Deckuf, just as it was starting to rain.

The place had a bar, several tables, a few cushy lounge chairs in the corner, and a 15-foot stage. They hosted bands and also had a poetry night every Thursday.

"They call it Spoken Word," I told Laura.

"What's the distinction," she asked.

"Spoken word is more like a performance," I told her. "It's like Jazz, but with words. And it also makes you think, like poetry."

My friend Lilian Studt was taking five-dollar cover at the door and stamping hands. Her jazz duo *Cedrick* was comprised of her and her partner William Echard. They were scheduled to close out the poetry show with music.

"We're gearing up this year to have more gigs," Lilian told me. "If anything comes up, please let us know."

"I sometimes booked music acts for my art openings," I explained to Laura as we walked in.

Laura called me a "true bohemian."

"That's what everybody thinks," I told her, "But this is all business. It's all expensed out. You're on the corporate account, baby."

She got a laugh out of that but there was some truth. I was going to write off the gallery tickets from earlier and the drinks we'd have tonight.

We settled into an intimate booth in the corner. Droplets of rain decorated the darkening window. Laura sat against the cushions, facing the stage. I shifted my wooden seat to see the stage, as the performances began.

The first poet up was a pale girl with purple hair and thick granny glasses. They had fringes on the corners. We listened to her, as we scanned the stage and the vibe in the room. The blue and red stage lights double-lit her face. Her poem was confusing at first. It sounded like she was reading book titles. She was. *The Great Gatsby*, *In Cold Blood*, *Harry Potter*, an *Archie Digest*, a textbook on Social Sciences, and the list went on and on. She revealed it was a list of books on her ex-girlfriend's bookshelf.

You can tell a lot about a person's bookshelf. The first books that the poet recited were the famous titles. Authors she recognized. The books at the end of the list were either more obscure or controversial. At times, the titles were metaphors for her relationship with her ex. Like *Sophie's Choice* came at a point when she digressed about their situation. There was an autobiography of Donald Trump hidden away in the corner, near the bottom. She said it was a book her parents gave her. Another book was about family trauma as it's passed on through heredity. In the end, it was the books that were hidden away which caused conflict in their relationship. The things we carry with us which don't represent us truly. Even the junk books in our personal libraries linger in our personalities.

Laura smirked and raised one eyebrow.

I leaned in and whispered, "I'm not showing you my library."

She couldn't help but tell me about her love of books. Then asked me, "Do you read, Alex?"

"Of course I read, Laura."

"What do you read?"

"I read comics. Mostly for the pictures," I told her.

"So you like picture books, Alex?" She said busting my balls.

I played along telling her, "I'm up to a third grade reading level now."

"Oh la la, you're a big boy."

"You better believe it."

We laughed.

"I read some non-fiction and crime fiction too," I added, before turning the inquisition on her. "What about you?"

"Biographies and a lot of literary fiction. Some romance," she admitted, giggling.

The candle on the table tanned her face yellow. We talked about our favorite books from the poet's list. *Archie Digest* really resonated with her.

"When I was a little girl, granddad brought home little paperbacks. I loved them so much. I've been a fan of *Betty and Veronica* ever since."

"I learned English from Archie comics," I told her.

"Really?! English? What language did you speak before?"

I got good at introducing myself over and over, on these first dates. It was only recently I thought I needed a "logline," like a film description. An elevator pitch, in case I met my next lover in an elevator.

"I was born in Romania, actually."

"So you're Romanian?"

"By birth, yes. Canada has been my home for twice as long. Besides the food I had at home growing up, I feel more Canadian than Romanian."

"Do you speak the language?"

"At the level of an eight year old. You know, Romanian is very close to French. It's a Romance language. One of the five Romance languages. French, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, and Romanian."

"*D'accord*," she said, figuring I'd understand.

"*De acord* would be the equivalent in Romanian. Means *to agree*."

"Of course," she translated. "It means 'of course.'"

"French is required here in Ottawa, with the government and all that." I caught myself in my dad's speaking pattern. "We're supposed to be bilingual," I continued. "I just lost interest in high school and haven't practiced since."

"You ordered poutine fine," she teased me.

"Stick with me, lady, and you won't starve," I said. And I gently flicked her chin upward, like we were starring in *Casablanca*.

We heard the next poet being called up on stage. He wore beads around his neck and wrists. Dressed in all black. Had a little peach fuzz goatee. He started speaking at a rhythmic pace.

"I ain't no provider," he said. "I got a lot on my mind-ah..."

I don't believe in matrimoney

I'm all about the mattress honey

Laura and I looked at each other. The delivery was stern and serious. But the tension released laughs among the audience. He went on for about three minutes.

It's in my nature, I'm a runner

Once you accept it, it'll be funner

I don't even know why you want me

Din't your parents warn you about me?

Laura laughed through the cringe.

Our love is now, not for evah

Sorry, I can't offer you bevah

If I could, I'd buy you dat ring

I'm upfront about what I bring

I ain't no provider, he said.

When he finished, he held out the mic and dropped it to the floor. He walked off stage into a crew of five guys at a front-row table. They cheered wildly, high-fives, and patted him on the back. One guy waved down the waitress to order his friend the poet a drink.

The cafe crowd loved it for being outrageous. Laura tried faking a laugh to fit in. I laughed it off, trying not to focus on the element of truth behind the comedy.

"Are you a provider, Alex?" She caught me off guard.

"Me? I'm an artist," I told her.

"Yes, I know you're an artist, Alex, but can you see yourself as a provider?"

This was a sore point but I took it on. "Being an artist is not an easy life," I told her. "It's not easy keeping a relationship."

"It's not?"

"Historically speaking. The artists I like, from the Renaissance, they were medians for god. Michelangelo, Da Vinci, both died as virgins. Rafael indulged himself and died of fever after love-making. He paid the price. Even Andy Warhol was a virgin till his sixties."

"I know you're not a virgin, Alex. What I'm asking is if you can provide for a woman."

"Great men don't know their abilities until they're tested," I told her. And then I added, "If love is on the line, I suppose I could be capable of anything."

"You're using language out of books, Alex. Let's be realistic."

"Oh, so you're traditional," I said, trying my best to deflect. "I understand. You need the support of a man."

"Quite the contrary," she said, offended. "I'm an independent woman."

"I get it, sweetheart," I said winking. "Things are hard nowadays."

"What if there were children?"

Laura was bringing out the heavy guns with heavy topics. I wasn't sure where her mind was going.

"My dear Laura, we just met," I said, making a joke of it again. Humour was my sole defense. "I want to keep things light," I told her. "But I'll be honest with you, Laura. I haven't given it much thought. I mean, it all depends on the couple I guess. You'd have to be able to negotiate who does what. I have friends where the roles are reversed. The female has a corporate job with benefits and he's the caregiver." I looked into her eyes and thought, I better tell her something good. "It all depends how the heart communicates between two souls," I finally said. "We have to get there, Laura. I *want* to get there *with you*, Laura."

I reached across the table and I touched her hand. She let me hold it, next to the candle warming our fingers.

She changed the subject, commenting how she liked the place I've chosen. When Laura dazzled me with her teeth, I mirrored her liveliness and cracked a few jokes, to bury her serious questions into the past. Her mood had flipped to a new page. Her eyes shimmered in the candlelight. Faint stage lights shifted colours on her cheeks.

The jazz duet came on. We listened to *Cedrick* for the first song and then we switched to chatting face-to-face. The sounds of electric piano and acoustic guitar became the soundtrack to our conversation. When the tempo was fast, our excitement matched it. When the music was smooth, we were romantic. Laura's words blended into the sounds. They danced through my ears. If it got too loud and hard to understand, I smiled and nodded and made sure she was comfortable.

I whispered in her ear, "Do you want another drink?" Her hair smelled like vanilla.

At the end of the night, as we were getting up to leave, I told Laura, "I changed my mind..."

"Changed your mind about what?" She was confused.

I held her breath with my words and said, "I thought about it and... I'd like to show you my library."

Amazon Link to purchase the book:

[Freelancer - Kindle edition by Aluas, Cristian. Literature & Fiction Kindle eBooks @ Amazon.com.](#)

THE TOPOGRAPHY OF MY CREVICES

Between my hand and forearm is scarred dirt.
A beige speck framed by a rich, dark brown.
It once was a sprout,
Looming from my wrist,
Threatening to bloom, to devour my poise.
So I gouged it between my nails,
And cleaved it with the might of my disgust.

Between my breast and bicep is a ridge—
The peak is where shame and excess meet.
Fat slopes on either side—
Veiled by clothing to shrink me,
Shifting with each tectonic tremor.
Between my palate and teeth is a thorn.

Fine hairs of desire surround its shaft,
Sharpness of reality at its tip.
Flavored with the pungency of betrayal,
Crisp between my molars.
I tell it to stay in its place,
To resist the pull of speech,
To camouflage me,
But it snaps under the weight of my words.

Between my anus and clitoris is a cave.

Dampened with love,

Darkened by harm,

Enduring the erosion of penetration,

Drinking light as it comes.

There are horizons to rise above—

Nights to journey through.

It knows dawn nears,

So I wait with it.

It breathes as I breathe,

Sweats as I sweat,

And survives as I survive.

What is it about this place?

Rape has parted its mouth,

Self-loathing has narrowed its basin,

But I let control's corpse lie here.

What of my other parts?

They've never known freedom unshackled by judgment,
Pillaged,
by my nails,
Barricaded,
by clothing,
Toppled,
by the coup of my desires.

I line my borders with black,
Dot my crevices with red.
But my body's map,
Is drawn by my bleached hand.

PROCEDURAL PAIN

Wounds ooze my glue-
Blue, with pinches of salt.
In need of cotton sheets,
I rip my underwear.
Swaddle, I must,
To be rid of these words in me.

Semantic antiseptic,
To sanitize my sentences.
Grammatical gauze,
To glue my grief.
Borrowed bandages,
To sculpt my stanzas.

Feeling frost on my arms,
I write goosebumps.
Tasting metal,
I write bitterness.
Hearing rushing rivers,
I write panic.

But where is truth
without tone?
How must meanings be written
without flesh?
How to detoxify
without allowing pain to drain?

Wounds ooze my glue-
Red, with stinging citrus.
In need of release,
I rip my gauze.
Bleed, I must,
To find the sinew in my poems.



A canoe just for you. Dawn's hazy view. A subdued light draws you here. No hurry, no haste. Distant thunder rumbles but does not disturb the quiet waterfront. In your canoe, you can go wherever you want. But without paddle or oar your haven is decided by current and there is no outward sign. Wherever you happen to arrive is just where you want to be. And you are here now.



CONFESSION OF A CONSCIENCE

My guard brings me bread and water every day at dawn. He addresses me as Napoleon, but the god of clay conquered nations, whereas I have overcome the world. Outwardly, I am not free, not while locked inside prison walls, but I find comfort in my ability to make choices, even though they always lead me to where I am. Every moment presents any number of possibilities. Just off the top of my head, I can take one step over to my crookedly hanging mirror and become lost in my reflection. Or I can peek through the peephole to glimpse part of the waters surrounding my isolated island. Or I can remain lying on my cell's creaky cot, dreaming of beyond. Well, why not reexplore all three possibilities for unrestrained variety? I have plenty of time... legally speaking, the rest of my lives.

Jetsam drifts on the surface of the sea some undefinable distance from shore. I can even make out the shape of a desk bobbing amidst the loose debris. I surmise that someone has dumped the desk into the saltwater where it has somehow managed to stay afloat. Zooming in through the lens of active imagination enables me to distinguish assorted

papers spread out lying undisturbed across the desktop, on shelves, and in opened drawers. I widen in amazement the moment I recognize these effects as my own! Magnifying once again, for an even more intimate view, I focus in on one or two records of particularly sensitive implication. Might I have polluted the expansive ocean reckoning that no one would witness my disposal, even less suspecting I could be condemned to multiple life sentences on the grounds of the alleged transgression?

I profoundly desire to report my findings to my confidant who resides beyond the space in which I am confined. I want to confess that our most confidential records have shown up, only God knows how, in the vast and mighty ocean for anyone to see. Yes, I want to reveal this to my confidant with whom I exchange messages now and then through our intermediary, this confidant being another me in a different dominion connected by a thread within a labyrinth, a world and self I must somehow return to, in one way or another. Of all the fragments I am sorting through, allusions and inferences I keep losing and recalling, a symbolic map suggests a pathway through the maze and a gateway beyond it.

I do not know why I had never looked up or noticed until now that no ceiling contains me as so many of my minds must have assumed. Indeed, the way above is open for flight. With knees bent, and elbows and shoulders drawn back, I allow myself to be lifted out of my cell, carried at the height of treetops to wherever the wind blows. And the wind bloweth where it listeth, even across continents and constellations, swaying the branches and swirling the leaves of a Bodhi fig tree fully spread. At first, I do not discern the one beneath the tree masked in multiplicity. He sits cross-legged in meditation, aware of each breath and thought, aware of everything, aware of nothing, intermingling with indrawn breath, dissipating in silent release while whispering winds convey entrusted messages to no particular place. With each incoming and outgoing breath, I descend deeper, nearer to groundless being, until I find myself functioning in a manner natural for the absence of surroundings.

If every particle of the universe, if every cell, is intelligent and potentially divine, then I don't need to look far to be inspired. Anything, no matter how seemingly mundane and uninteresting, is latent with imaginative life to perception if I become available to it. This requires a certain disposition of soul, a kind of being in love with the world as my beloved.

Primordially, archetypically, everything is one, everything is light. Then a decision is somehow made to conceal something from oneself. Apparent darkness ensues, a division and separation into duality and multiplicity, an overlooking of the thing hidden while simultaneously retaining transcendent awareness of the mystery of that thing. The potential exists for darkness to be restored to light, everything becoming unity again, were there really such a thing as becoming, were there really such a time as again.

SUMMER

When ice cream drips
On children's hands

When lemon stings
Our whistling lips

When mercury flips
Mad dogs and rugged men

When indigo gathers
In hems of clouds

When driving rains
Riddle the roads

And wrestling streams
Raise algae from stones

When dreams of you
Rattle my brain like ice cubes

O summer! I am alone.

JANIE, 1970

Upstairs her old-world weary mother measures us
busts, waists, length to hem
she hand sews eight bridesmaid dresses
fingers never slipping on ice-blue taffeta
her tongue dry-clicking rosary prayers as she goes
to bless her daughter and each of us.

Downstairs the slick-haired hot-rod fiancé dances

Mama Told Me Not to Come

with eight of us down the line, saying to each
“Hey gorgeous, guess I won’t be sleepin’ with you no more.”
He knows Janie is leaning against the door.

Taffeta.

I think of taffy, that big as a bumper sticker striped ribbon kind
we had as kids, flat-ironed in thin paper
that stuck till my brother showed me how to peel it wet.
Now eight bluebells plus one white bride
and a man with roving eyes
will add up to a two-year marriage
that wears out the clicking tongue of Janie’s mother
and subtracts a certain dimension from Janie’s soul.

The flatness she is left with
becomes a thin edge, useful for slicing
her way into the corporate world
meanwhile, eight times she appears at her bridesmaids’ weddings
always dancing with the grooms,
always saying “I give you two years.”

Skating on paper
She understands surfaces
Unfold everything.

he said the PROPHECY

not the profit

will PROFIT the people

if my brother hurting

wont i cry?

if my sister drowning

wont i die?

My brother

said he could

Dip

his hand in blood

without getting Stained ,

I ntentional displacement.

M
M others miraculous marathon!

I mperialism and intervention.

G°
R away

A re we aliens or alienated?

N°

T aking over

S tolen land

CONCRETE JUNGLE

I see the bones of myself
In a U-shaped apartment

My fingers extending in
The spaces of the crosswalk

The white noise of the train
Muddles in the mind

An alley is new vein
For life to run through

A simple curb to sit
And stare at my own anatomy

REACHING

A vitamin D disposition of which I am deficient

Makes me crawl in bed and wait (for what?)

A break, some crack in the sky

Where the light might reach me again

ABECEDARIAN OF A BLACK SHEEP

An obsessive compulsive, neurotic lamb, lost from the fold
Bleats wild and empty, her mouth a bleeding maw, a
Creature caught chewing, mouth gushing, the
Dawns bloody colors dripping wretched off her furry down.
“Enough,” she speaks, “enough the
Frothing and foaming and frolicking;
Give me solace from this meal, ache my teeth no more this earth,
Heal my soft, smooth molars of this stained morning,
Ink the grass beneath my hooves with less the violence of my
Jaw. I loathe to feed myself this routinely needful
Kill.” The flock stares at her, cud dangling on their
Lips, waste stuck beneath their tails; a civilization
More or less disengaged,
Nearer to the ground than the hellishly devoured dawn. A shepherd
Orchestrates a fine toothed
Path, his staff a rigored snake bound in restless, skyward
Quest to the path makers hand; he could have
Run, had he leg of lamb (all the better to eat you with).
Should the snake sentiently slither to choke the Shepherd
Thought the lamb, the twilight of her dawn would
Undulate a bitterless gold, a gutturally sparkling decadence
Vilifying her, liberating her, sharpening her pointed teeth. But,
Wooden stays the snake, quiet stays the flock,
Xeric goes her mouth, filled less of blood and more of dirt.
Yesterday sits a wanton vampire but tomorrow the
Zealots turn toward the sun.

WHO LOVE IS

Let me ride the couch ugly and I will love you pretty;
Give you all my gorgeous.

Let me run naked and gross through the kitchen streets,
Block traffic wearing my wrecking ball body,
And I will eat you whole, consume you
Through to marrow at the dinner table,
Between my lungs; between my Legs.

Let me bleed Sappy on the floor,
Stain your bright carpet black,
Hang slack my jaw mid-air in cut-off song,
And I will show you what shapes my mouth makes.

Let my skin shrivel and fall to your feet,
Step tenderly over its shards, the hairy shrapnel of me,
And I will show you who love is.

THE BURDEN OF BEING

The burden of being

Set on fire

Is delicate and sublime.

And I love the way my skin melts

Into the shape of you.

FORGETFUL POLLY

I don't like it when you do that.

You don't like anything I do.

He stalks cat-like closer, becomes an eerie mirage; the fever dream a false prophet might call God.

I like plenty.

His voice becomes a fish hook; is raspy and growls forward, crawls around the room, seeps out of the vents like smoke from a house fire;

But you know better than to try to escape. You know what that does to me.

My fingers are working at the hard-fastened bundle of rope that binds my hands behind my back. My efforts are more an anxious tic, now, than anything else, one that achieves nothing. I remain bound.

He kneels down. We are eye to eye and he is fiercely unsettled,

Look at me.

I turn only my head away, cricked at an uncomfortable angle. I don't want to look at him. I close my eyes to avoid it.

He pulls my face straight,

Why do you hate me?

Why do you keep me?

Why do you make me?

I fall silent.

He rises red and the room turns orange; the only window in the room lets in a blur and beam of smoggy sunset which settles in hot layers around us.

He stands and silhouettes himself, shamelessly leans against the frame, and lights a cigarette. When he looks away from me, he rolls his eyes and looks out the windows glass cracks into the rolling heat of the city.

Fuck him.

He sits on the bed and grabs an out of tune acoustic guitar from the ground next to me, begins lulling a wordless but familiar tune. The bedsheets are torn and I can see through cigarette holes to the mattress underneath. The stains on his jeans begin to morph into the faces of people I used to love.

Forget them, Polly.

Everything he owns is torn.

Stop it.

Forget them. They're not real. It's just me and its just you.

Stop. It.

He stills the strings, one hand flat across the bridge of metal. The lulling stops. The sing-song stops. He stares and I stare back. His eyes are dilated, pupils big and black, and I wonder if their inky pitch mirrors my own.

You look pretty there, like that.

I'll have to believe you.

He crosses the room, now dense and gray, chewy with smoke, and snuffs his cigarette. The ashtray is a tall relic, placed strategically by the only exit for a quick snuff before leaving the apartment. I look at the doors multiple padlocks. I'm not going anywhere without a key. I heard once, somewhere lyrical I think, that too many swallowed keys will make you bleed internally someday. He is a hollow vessel whose cup runneth over with gut blood.

The smoke thins up to the ceiling and I watch the room cool to a quiet blue. He starts playing louder and the sound makes me calm; fuels a strange hunger. I am Pavlov's dog.

When the music stops, the air begins to hurt my arms and I wonder if this is what love is.

I close my eyes for a long time. Then he is on my skin; a sappy, fungal growth stuck between me and my thoughts.

Don't be bad anymore.

He pulls me up and I stand, lean on him with my whole body in order not to fall forward on my face. He walks around me and unties my hands. I don't move. I don't speak. I steady myself enough that I don't have to crush my chin onto his shoulder for balance. Once I am untethered, he seems reluctant to let go, but does. My skin burns, there are marks in rings around my wrists. I look at the red wrinkles and back at him; into him.

I will not say

Thank You.

Welcome. Always welcome.

I'm only wearing enough to cover my torso and thighs. He likes the places where bare skin touches the hems of my clothes. I kind of do too.

The apartment is a bed, a small alcove with a microwave, and a dirty bathroom. It's small and dank and its sole window is more of a conversation piece than a unit of actual, operational utility.

I am a house, a small enclave in which to bolt locks and lose keys. I am small and dank; more of a conversation piece than a unit of actual, operational utility.

He is a tank, a hulking, moving cell comprised of locks and keys and metal. He is the smoking hull of what is left behind in the dank; more of a conversation piece than a unit of actual, operational utility.

I go to shower.

I like you filthy.

I want to be clean.

Fine. Leave the door open.

When I finally move, I ache and creak-frozen like old hinges. He touches the small of my back when I pass the bed.

Love me tonight?

Love you forever.

He came up with the cardboard sign exchange some night before he settled on me; an image he designed long before I came to be a fixture in his little efficiency nightmare. It's nice to be a part of someone's dream, though; no matter how terrifying.

I start the shower and undress. The shower head is broken, and makes a racket of its job. The stall is so small and walls so close, any steam build up feels suffocating and unbreathable. The fan screams when it turns on.

Forget them, Polly.

That is not his voice spoken in the cacophony of bathroom noise. But, when I nevertheless hear it through the din, my heart becomes a broken typewriter, letters jumble and plunge off center onto a page on fire. I center my page, test the water's temperature: too hot. The clean I am looking for is not found by the works of soap and scrub, but that outside noise is dulled when my head is underneath the shower's violent spray and for a moment I don't feel the words in my head as clear or as loud or as sure.

I am done and the shower is off, I dry myself in the dark with the fan off and steam clinging to me heavy as skin.

There is breathing on the other side of the door. I hug my dirty clothes to myself, ready to go into the other room and meet him. I hope the swing of the door shoves him away.

No one is on the other side of the door. There is no one on the bed. There is no one by the microwave. There is no one snuffing a cigarette by the open door.

The front door is open.

I squeeze water out of my hair onto the floor and the splash makes too much noise. I slam on my dirty clothes. I only manage to pull on my tee and shorts; the hems rub my skin, irritates raw, exposed places.

I stare at the door. *I'm fucking insane. It's always just been me.*

It's just me.

I hear a long sigh and I look around but I don't see him.

Fuck it.

I scramble and head for the door. No shoes, wet hair, my nipples are showing through my sheer shirt and my wrists are bleeding in Morse Code;

Dot, dot dash, dash.

I jam in the door, sway momentarily. *What is this? Why now? I've been here for a week.*

The adjacent wall says:

THIS WAY OUT

with an arrow to its left pointing to a stairwell that descends, unlit, into darkness. A patch of ill-suited graffiti over the arrow says

FUCKING WALLS.

I follow it reluctantly, unsteady.

My heart becomes a stranger that tells me secrets I shouldn't know. I start down the stairs listening to its wretched, deafening hammering and

He is there,

Waiting in the dark at the bottom of the stairwell.

I step back up and sink the ground. The graffiti

FUCKING WALLS

Presses against my back.

Polly, where were you going to go?

He is serious, looks down at me, has one headphone in an ear that blares disembodied elevator music; a foreign language represented by disjunct tones that sound like far away announcements.

He pulls me up and walks me back to his apartment, the door still ajar and seeping gray into the florescent hallway. I scrape the walls' cold, chipped paint under my nails as I pass back through the corridor. I want to feel

THIS WAY OUT

on my skin as I walk back to my cage. The locks click into place behind me and I try to hide in his bed but he likes playing, and pins me.

How dare you? What was the point?

Would you really be free if you left, Polly?

He is on top of me and I close my eyes, twist away. He lowers his face and he lets his lips hover just over mine; they don't touch until every other part of us is touching, too.

Why would you-

He doesn't want me to finish.

Hands on hips, tattoos scratched and screaming, the sheets have another burn, our mouths another key worth swallowing.

He whispers

Forget them, Polly

And a quiet hugs me in sudden, sharp shapes.

Then:

*POLLY
POLLY?
POLLY*

There she is. Welcome back.

A small sterile room with a small sterile bed. He is staring from a small sterile chair. He has rope. It latches into the security loops on my bed.

Why is everything

Lifeless, colorless

White? Wasn't there a window in here?

It's always been this way. This is a closed facility, Polly.

You seem really familiar.

I try to sit up to get a clear look at the shapeless, growling voice stalking toward me, but I am strapped down. The friction on my wrists and ankles hurt and my skin burns. I anxiously finger a hole in the sheets around my left hand, it feels hot and cauterized. He stands, hovers over me until our eyes meet. I hear codes, foreign announcements, coming from his tactfully lodged earpiece.

Forget them, Polly. Forget them all.

How GOOD It Is

How good it is to see from afar and read:

Hot Chocolate daily, also available iced

Mexican pop-up every first Saturday – all are welcome

How good it is to walk about.

How good it is to think. And feel.

How good it is to leave defunct lovers.

How good it is not to settle for less. Or keep reaching for too much.

How good it is to think tomorrow is also full of possibilities.

How good it is to receive a handwritten letter. Not a bill. Or, a notice of any kind.

How good it is to put butter on my toast. And homemade jam. Plum.

How good it is to turn off the TV. And put music on. Brahms.

How good it is to be.

SMALL TALK

Translated by Kinga Lipinska

You are a beautiful autumn sky, clear and rose!
Still—sadness rises within me like the sea,
And leaves, receding, on my lip morose
The stinging memory of its bitter silt.

Your hand glides in vain on my fainting chest;
What it wants to plunder, love, is a place laid waste
by ferocious teeth and claws of a certain female.
Thus—seek not my heart, it was wolfed by fiends.

See, my heart is a palace wrecked by the rabble
Where they drink, kill, and tear out their hair!
Still—a perfume lifts around your naked throat.

O Beauty! Hard tormentor of souls, have your way!
With your fiery eyes, brilliant like festival lights
Scorch scraps of me that the fiends have left behind.

“LIKE A TIDE SWELLED BY THE MELT
OF GROANING GLACIERS,
WHEN THE WETNESS OF YOUR MOUTH MEETS
THE EDGE OF YOUR TEETH,

IT SEEMS I IMBIBE A BOHEMIAN WINE,
VICTORIOUS AND BITTER,
A LIQUID SKY THAT SEEDS
MY HEART WITH STARS.”

- CHARLES BAUDELAIRE

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