

# Superpresent



Winter 2024



**SUPERPRESENT**

# Superpresent

A Magazine of the Arts

---

Volume 4, Number 1

---

Editor-in-Chief  
Kevin Clement

Arts Editor  
David McClain

Literary Editor  
Alan Ainsworth

Film and Music Editor  
Andrew Potter

Publisher  
Goupi Press



## HOW TO REACH US

Email: [editor@superpresent.org](mailto:editor@superpresent.org)

Website: [www.superpresent.org](http://www.superpresent.org)



ISSN 2767-5289

Copyright 2024 Goupi Press. Copyright to individual works contained herein are retained by the contributing artists and writers.



Front Cover  
*Guillaume, Belgium. Carpenter*  
Jeremy Starn



Back Cover  
*Untitled*  
Harry Dawber

<b>EDITORS' NOTES</b>		4
<b>PROSE</b>		
Duncan Forbes	Creation Myth	13
	Thought Police: Publish at Your Peril	103
Christopher Dunn	Human ChatBot for Hire	29
	"Breaking News Bulletins on Individuals Impacted by the Justice System: Revised by Sensitivity Readers"	35
Eric Andrade	Brahmin Brunch	47
César Mora Moreau	Venus Shines Next to the Moon	57
Frances Gaudiano	Words Will Come	67
Jillian Elkin	Sugar Baby Yard Sale	75
Loren Niemi	Was and Was Not	83
Richard Risemberg	Morning Coffee	87
Robyn Michaels	How I Became Myehudi	93
<b>POETRY</b>		
David Kirby	Cruelty: A User's Manual	7
	To the Westminster College Student Who Called Me a Trifling	
	White-Ass Motherfucker	113
Ed Ahern	Dirty Drinking	12
Nick Flynn	Ping	15
	Dear Maggot,	18
	<i>La Strada</i> on Pay Per View	19
	A Wall of Honey	22
	Film	23
	Volunteers	26
	Bikini	27
Cat Crochunis-Brown	Invert	31
	Caesar is an Eighth-Grader	74
Christopher Dunn	Charity	33
	Hope	65
	Liberty	71
Carole Greenfield	Intoxication	40
Duncan Forbes	Modern Life and Other Complications	41
	Dawkins' Hymn	43
David Axelrod	Whiskey & Crank	46
Fiona Selden	drink me dry, patriarchy	51
Tara Joyce	The Ram	53
	making change	87
Joseph Geskey	Oranges from Gaza	56
Jane Blanchard	On the Loose	59
Bart Edelman	How to Find Love	91
David Felix	Issue	97
	The Shadow Caster	98
	Natterbabble	99
Theodore Eisenberg	Good Morning	100
Pasquale Trozzolo	Breakfast at Aberdeen Village	101
George Ryan	National Defense	107
Johnny Cate	White Whale	109
Erin Wilson	Body	111

<b>ART</b>		
Gemma Guiomard	Back of Thread Palette	10
	The Only Reason	11
Nick Flynn	Ping	16
	Dear Maggot,	17
	<i>La Strada</i> on Pay Per View	20
	A Wall of Honey	21
	Film	24
	Volunteers	25
	Bikini	28
Quincey Spagnoletti	The Room at the Top of the Stairs	34
	I Like Ironing Dad's Shirts	74
Natalie Christensen	She Had an Idea	36
	Open to New Ideas	73
Flavie Guerrand	Flavio	37
	Ben	38
	Leila	39
Josephine Florens	Ain't Your Business	42
	Bavavna Man	44
	The Evil-Tongued Women	45
Michael Wood	Illicit Trade	50
Mohammad Amin Shafiei	Wrinkled No. 3	52
Krystof Novotny	End of an Era	54
	Self-Portrait with Cat	86
Runa	Oppression (stand firm)	55
Noel Bennett	First Known Unknown	58
Abaine Campbell-Gardner	Pop Out	60
Michael Webster	Crystal Scaffold	79
	Transpose	81
	Dropped	82
Jeremy Strand	Artur. Poland. Wooden Ship Builder	90
Erin Wilson	The Wheel	92
	The Way	112
Walter Dermul	Sous la plage les pavés	102
Yuliia Khovbosha	Broken Heart	106
Dan Gray	Empty. Arms.	108
Emma Griffiths	Beauty mirror observation series	110
Meg Cook	Canadian Fireman	117
	Lil' Bishop	118
<b>VIDEO</b>		
Helena S. Rodriguez	Latent Daydreams	62
Shaun Griffiths	Under Some Auspices (In Advance of a Broken State)	62
Pauline Galiana	It Never Dies	63
Rachel McGee	Indigo Ablution	63
Via Bulaon	Puke Namin (Our Vagina)	64
<b>CONTRIBUTORS</b>		119

## Donors for Volume 4

*Superpresent* would like to thank the following people who have generously contributed to the journal:

Richard Bebermeyer

E.J. Clement

Nancy Giles

Richard C. Rice

Jane Schmitt

Make a contribution to support *Superpresent* and join this illustrious list.

[https://www.paypal.com/donate/?hosted\\_button\\_id=TRQH5WFKAZLJ2](https://www.paypal.com/donate/?hosted_button_id=TRQH5WFKAZLJ2)

## Editors' Note

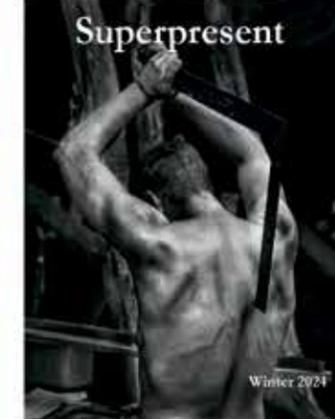
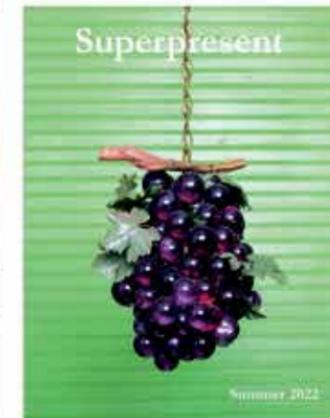
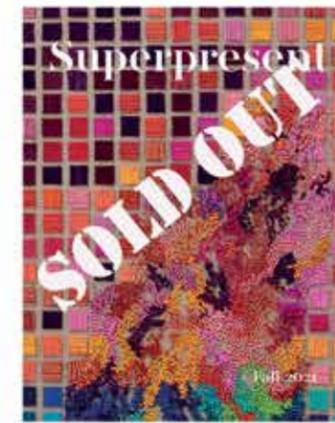
The secret of course is that *Superpresent* has always been a vehicle for us to provoke and instigate. We thought we might as well be explicit about it. Hence this issue's theme: Provocations/Instigations. A provocation may be thought of as any action that is intended to cause a reaction, especially anger or annoyance, but it might also be the nudge necessary to get good things done, to see things clearly, to manage our way through the thicket of conformity and banality and misinformation. An instigation, according to Merriam-Webster, "implies responsibility for initiating or encouraging someone else's action and usually suggests dubious or underhanded intent." But sometimes an instigation is necessary, a brave refusal to accept what is wrong with the world or ourselves. We would gladly take responsibility for initiating some of the actions and thoughts contained herein, but that's really what the artists and writers do. Some contributors instigate and provoke, others point out when it's being done to us.

We are delighted that so many contributors were prompted to bring their own provocations and instigations to light. We highly recommend spending time with new works by well-lauded writers like Nick Flynn and David Kirby and Duncan Forbes. There is also much to consider in the other pieces in this issue. For instance, *Under Some Auspices* (In Advance of a Broken State), Shaun Griffiths' video made in response to the Trump-led crimes of insurrection and treason on January 6th, may comment on the instigations and provocations of the far right and its dependence on empty gestures. Or consider *Flavio*, by Flavie Guerrand, which reminds us of something a man said in a news article twenty years ago, "Man, I just sit here and watch the comic strip go on by." *Pop Out*, by Abaine Campbell-Gardner seems to take on/borrow/steal from Willem de Kooning's *Women* paintings, but radically morphing its iconography with the addition of a phallus and the removal of a face. We found profundity, understanding, flamboyance, humor, anger, and revolutionary zeal in much of the work submitted.

Sometimes form itself can be the provocation. See, for instance, the work of David Felix or that of Michael Webster. And while some instigations rely on words leading to action, sometimes unexpected actions lead to the most meaningful words. See *Words Will Come*, by Frances Gaudiano for an extraordinary case in point.

The theme for the next issue is SURVIVAL. Artists and writers are welcome to challenge what that term means or implies. Our greatest pleasure is discovering how each theme is interpreted. And a reminder, please consult the submission requirements, especially word-length. We have received quite a few manuscripts which, despite our sincere request for relative and appropriate brevity, not only about our word limit, but often exceed it to their own detriment. To quote Glen Hansard at the Academy Awards a few years ago, "Make art! Make art! Make art!"

*-the Editors*



**DON'T MISS A SINGLE ISSUE.  
SUBSCRIBE TODAY!**



[www.superpresent.org](http://www.superpresent.org)

## Cruelty: A User's Manual

My mother rode a horse to school, and one morning she was coming over a ridge when she saw a group of men standing around a tree.

One of the men waved his arms and shouted, *Go back!* but it was too late: she'd already seen the body dangling from a branch.

Cruelty's fun, isn't it? Nobody made those men hang the other man.

Politicians know this, know that we're not much good at it one on one: if you hate your neighbor because they cut down your tree or your co-worker because they took credit for a job you did, you just get sour and resentful and start hating yourself for being petty.

But if you hate a group, then suddenly your life has meaning and purpose, especially when you join with those who feel the way you do.

Suddenly you know who you are: you're the person who knows that people who look and act and talk the way you do are superior to the ones who don't, that your god, the one true god, made the others look and act and talk the way they do so you'll know to hate them.



In the death camp at Birkenau, a violin professor at the Jewish Conservatory in Rotterdam named Leon Bloorman approaches his former student Louis Bannet.

*Louis*, he says, *do you know what they made me do? They made me play my violin while they hanged a man.*

*He was a Frenchman*, Bloorman says. *They pulled him on a cart to the gallows. I had to stand behind him and play "La Marseillaise." Can you explain such a thing to me?*

And Bannet replies, *I don't have an answer. There are no answers here.*



Montaigne says that *amongst other vices, I cruelly hate cruelty, both by nature and judgment, as the very extreme of all vices*, but who listens to him?

This was a new attitude in the West: in the Christian tradition, cruelty is not one of the seven deadly sins and before Montaigne, philosophers had condemned cruelty as a vice but certainly not as the most extreme one.

Five hundred years later, a president who believes his country is the birthright of straight, white, Christian men finds that his only real pleasure is in the cruelty that binds his supporters to him in shared scorn for those they hate and fear: immigrants, black voters, feminists, and treasonous white men who don't believe the way they do.

His ability to embody that cruelty in word and deed makes them euphoric, makes them feel so proud, so happy, so united that they will let him get away with anything, no matter what it costs.

The president hasn't read Montaigne, would never say, *I possess so much tenderness that I cannot see a chicken's neck pulled off without trouble, and cannot without impatience endure the cry of a hare in my dog's teeth, though the chase be a violent pleasure.*



My Bible-thumping aunt saw gays as an abomination in the eyes of the Lord, yet half the women who wept at her funeral were women in what she referred to as *Boston marriages*.

When I asked her about Mr. Harris, who sold shoes and came over most Sundays for tea, she said, *Oh, he's different*. Mr. Harris was *a confirmed bachelor*, she said.



Montaigne's Europe was torn by strife that would lead to massacre and civil war, which meant that thoughtful men and women like him were asking the most basic questions about the social order, the nature of obedience, the oppressive force of custom.

It was the best of times and the worst of times. You know, like today.



Some of the musicians who played at Birkenau continued to make music after the Holocaust, but many never played again.

*Louis, you are stronger than me*, said Leon Bloorman. *I don't think I can go on like this much longer.*

*Try to think of this*, said his friend. *The man they hanged today, the last sound he heard was your beautiful playing.*



*What were the other men doing when that man tried to make you go back?* I ask my mother.

She pauses for a minute, looks down, then at me. *Those other men?* She says. *They were laughing.*

-David Kirby



*Back of Thread Palette*  
Gemma Guimard



*The Only Reason*  
Gemma Guimard

### **Dirty Drinking**

It was always unhygienic,  
sipping communion wine from  
the same gold-plated chalices,  
the wiping cloths quickly soiled  
after the first communicants.  
But Covid queered communion.  
Sanctity quails before contagion,  
and sucking from the same cup  
has been discontinued if not retired,  
and more and more chalices  
are being sold used on eBay  
for around a hundred bucks.

*-Ed Abern*

## Creation Myth

And man said, Let us make god in our own image, after our likeness.

And let him, because by definition he will want to be male, let him have dominion over all of us, over mammals, reptiles, birds, fish, insects, molluscs and indeed all the flora and fauna, vertebrates and invertebrates, as a kind of king or feudal lord with absolute powers over all the earth and every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.

So man created god in his own image, in the image of man he created him; and the human god in turn recognised gender differences in male and female, as if he knew what they meant.

And the god they had created blessed them and said: Have it. Have all of it. It's your planet. Plant it. Be fruitful and multiply in geometric progression. Exploit it and all its resources. It's OK by me. Over-fishing, bird extermination, selective breeding, megafauna extinction. They're all yours. Every living thing that moves upon the earth.

I have given you for your nutrition every herb-bearing seed which is on the surface of the earth and every tree from pear, plum, peach, hazel, walnut and cherry *et cetera*, all for your personal delectation.

I have also provided food for every carnivore, herbivore, omnivore and all the birds of the air and even flightless birds like kiwis, ostriches and poultry.

And then god said, I have also given you cash crops, sugar, coffee, chocolate, tea and fish and chips.

And man saw everything he had been given, and, behold, it was good. Really good. And god said, I've made the whole universe for you: sun moon stars oceans tides rivers mountains outer space light heat the lot. Job done. Time to get some sleep. It's Sunday after all.

And then, refreshed, the omnipotent and omniscient god made in their own image said, You think you made me but it was really I who created you. Do you want to know how?

Tell us, said the humans. We like stories. We want to be in one all to ourselves.

I formed man out of the dust of the earth by adding some water and, mouth-to-nostrils, breathed life into his lungs in a kind of cardio-pulmonary supernatural vitalisation procedure.

And then I planted a garden eastward in Eden, an irrigated garden, a perfect cornucopia; and there I planted the man I had fashioned.

I made the trees grow out of the ground and so on and so forth. I granted you free will but in exchange I required undying belief and total obedience as well as a certain wilful ignorance.

Above all, avoid knowledge, I said. In the long run it will bring you nothing but trouble, especially the fruit of the tree of knowledge which bears the apples, the apples of science. Of all the trees in the garden, that one is banned. Verboten. Taboo.

And out of the ground I created every beast of the field and every bird of the air and brought them to the man named Adam to see what he would call them. Giraffe. Hippopotamus. Elephant. Rat. Horse. Toad. Starling. Flamingo. Vulture.

And Adam named the lot because there is nothing much men like more than complex nomenclature and the potency of names.

Then I said you need a madam, Adam, a proper helpmate. And so I anaesthetised Adam and surgically extracted one of his ribs and fashioned it into a life-size naked woman.

Cor blimey, said Eve. That explains a lot.

There's more to come, said god.

Yes, hissed the snake, there's me with my forked tongue and seductive logic. Most women dislike snakes because they remind them of tails, rats' tails, mouse tails, and male genitalia. But it's a little known fact that some sophisticated serpents can talk and we like chatting up the opposite sex by which I mean women and there was only one in the Garden of Eden at the time.

Tell us about it, said god.

It's far too well-known and to be honest we snakes come out of almost any story badly.

Go on, said Eve. Remind me.

Oh all right then. In a few words. Nothing wrong with the apples. Eat them. They give you godlike powers. Malic acid and all that. He's a tyrant and a bigoted idiot, that god of yours. Eat them. You'll see. Knowledge is power. So you did. You both did.

She tempted me, said Adam. You wanted to, said Eve.

Well, god punished us all after that.

Yes, I did, said god. I turfed you out of paradise and called you miserable sinners and made you all mortal. You gave painful birth to two sons, one of whom killed the other out of fraternal jealousy.

And I never developed arms and legs, said the snake, but I have had to crawl around on my belly unhappily ever after, just for expressing an opinion, a true opinion.

But there is nothing worse than disobedience, said god, who always had to have the last word. Just wait till you hear my fifty commandments.

-Duncan Forbes

## Ping

At the party, you followed me  
into the bathroom & asked

to watch as I pissed,

& I left my body & sat on the edge  
of the sink beside you,

both of us just  
watching. It all happened

so fast. In comic books

you get to see what the cowboy  
is thinking

the moment his gun jams,

as the bullets fly around him (one  
even PINGS the gun

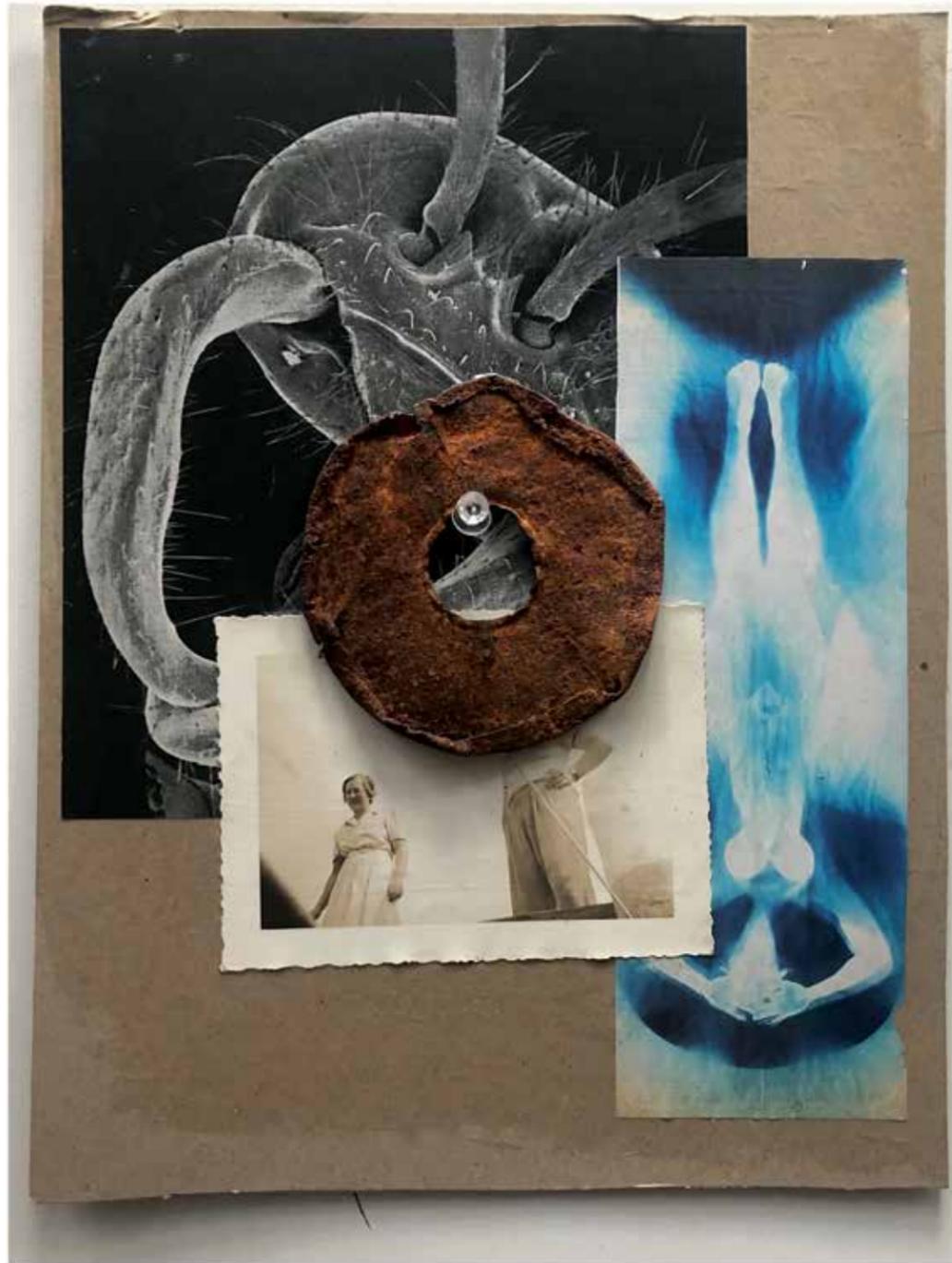
right out of his hand), a bubble  
over his head with a word

inside it.

*-Nick Flynn*



*Ping*  
Nick Flynn



*Dear Maggot*  
Nick Flynn

**Dear Maggot,**

First you are wing, then you are egg.  
Then a thousand eggs. Then each egg  
opens. Injured or poisoned, the creature  
dragged its fur to the edge of the pond,  
bent its snout to drink & never rose again.  
By the time we smell it, you already live inside.  
You ate your way in, starting with the eyes,  
with the mouth, with the asshole—any hole  
is a door. The belly now swells like a circus  
tent. Inside, you perform your transformations—  
*bone to dust, muscle to dirt.* In only a few hours  
you will become winged again.

*-Nick Flynn*

*La Strada on Pay Per View*

I want you  
to watch so you'll know

what to expect. In

this room  
we are two snakes,

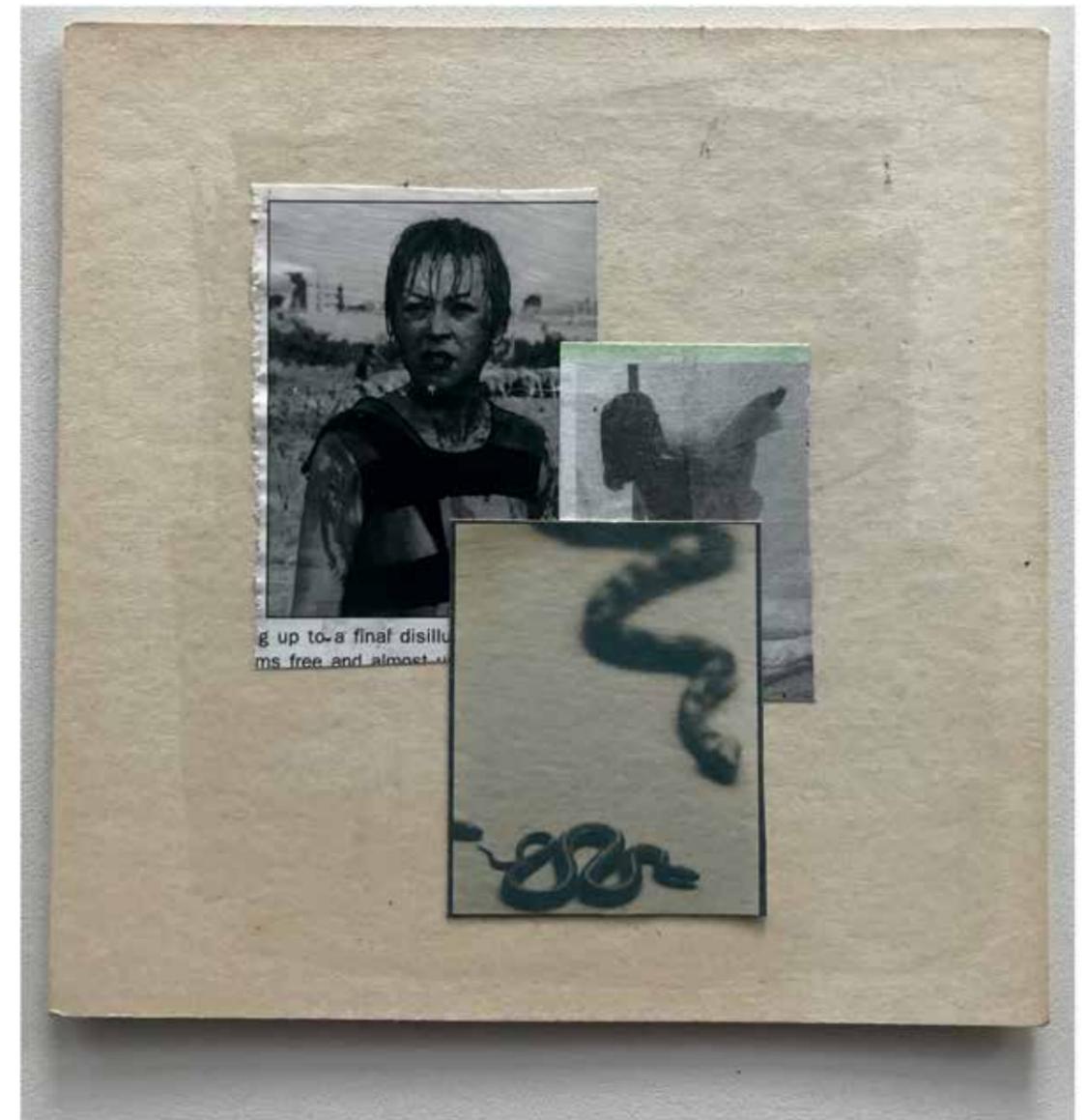
teardrops folding in  
on themselves, one

moving toward the other,  
everything

hungry . . . like them,

as long as we perform  
we eat.

*-Nick Flynn*



*La Strada on Pay Per View*  
Nick Flynn

### A Wall of Honey

This was the plan: we'd travel the world, buying jars of honey wherever we went—this one from Vietnam (*nearly black*), this one from Egypt (*golden, milky*). It all depends, of course, on the flowers. Back home, I'd build a wall of these jars, sit at a wooden table, watch as the sun poured through. *Home . . .* I was always walking toward it, with what they call the "key" in my hand. I thought home was where the dead gather, like amber, a bug you can buy to hang from your neck. This is what I learned: to make it home, you must carve a door for the dead, paint a number on it, so she'll know where to find you.

-Nick Flynn



*A Wall of Honey*  
Nick Flynn

## Film

It's the scene where the young single mother goes into a food pantry & is walked through the aisles & given a couple bags of whatever she wants but at some point she is alone & she turns her body into a corner & pulls the lid off a can of what looks like baked beans & pours them into her hand & starts to shovel them into her mouth until the woman who had shown her such terrible kindness comes back & touches her arm softly & asks if she's okay, but the mother, dazed, says only *I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry*. I'm on the couch beside my daughter, *What's happening?* she asks & I start to cry but not so much that she can hear. *She's hungry*, I say, *she's hungry*

-Nick Flynn



Film  
Nick Flynn



*Volunteers*  
Nick Flynn

### Volunteers

From a distance, the city  
looks blanketed in

smoke. Inside,

it's hard to breathe. A song  
is playing, the walls

are spattered with, what  
is that, oil? That

soldier, this isn't

his house, it wasn't his sister.  
The explosion, it

came from somewhere  
outside of him, it was

called in. This house,

if we can empty it of all  
meaning,

we will be safe. What about  
the house next to it

& the house next to that? That  
song has been playing this whole

time, an almost

imperceptible drone. The family?  
They live in a camp now.

The student? She  
didn't finish her assignment.

The patient? He's on life-  
support. The garden? Seed

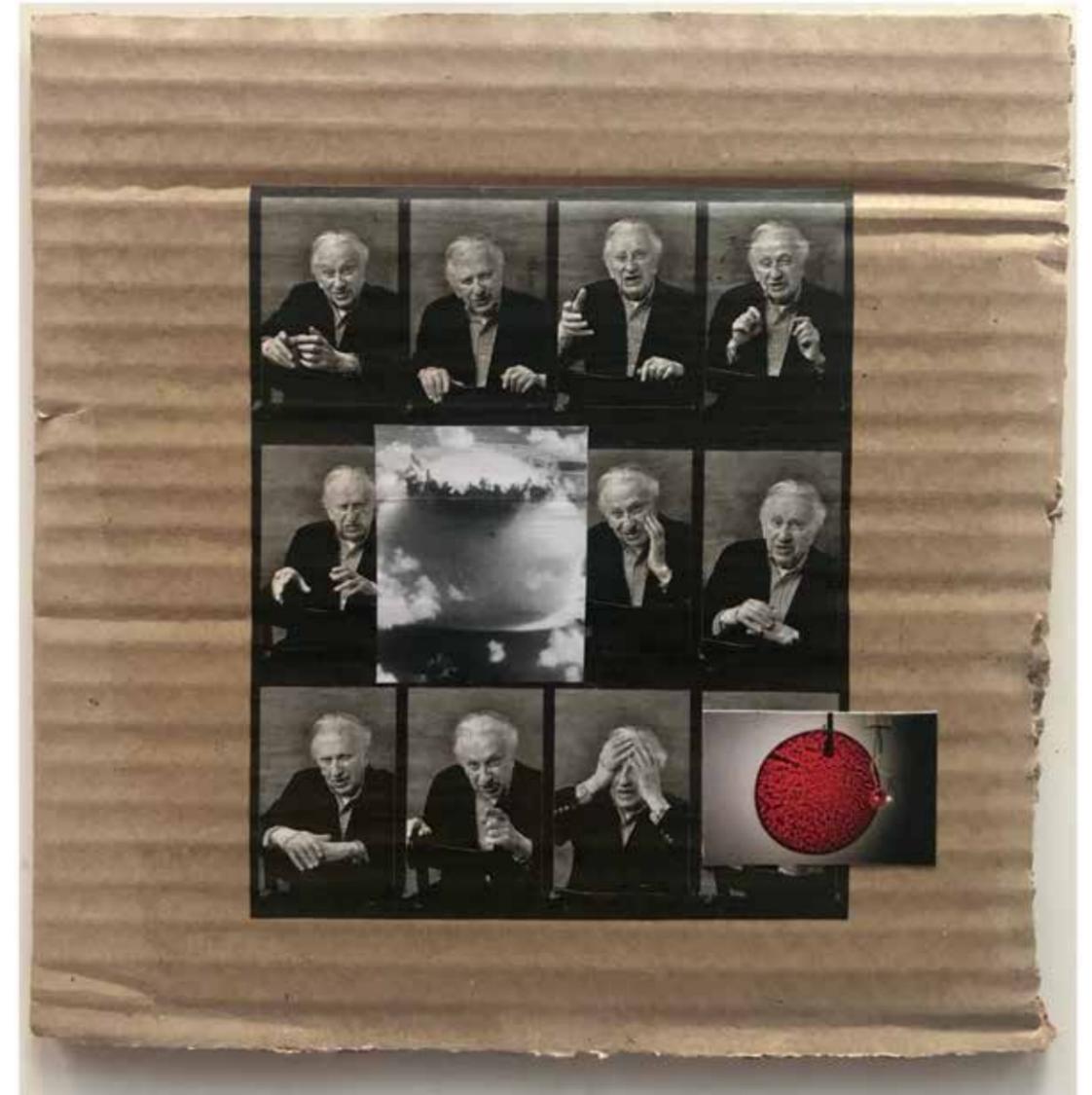
blew in from fields  
a hundred miles away.

*-Nick Flynn*

## Bikini

We grew up inside a bomb,  
  
we tested it on an island  
we'd emptied of people. In  
  
the photograph, dwarf  
  
warships circle a crown  
rising up from the waves—we knew  
  
what happened  
  
to the other creatures who  
lived on that island,  
  
all of us knew. Some of us  
just fit into darkness,  
  
make it whole. Since  
  
that day, a small red dot  
hangs in the air, whenever  
  
we close our eyes, wherever  
we turn our heads, it's  
  
always there, small & red.

*-Nick Flynn*



*Bikini*  
Nick Flynn

## Human ChatBot for Hire

LinkedIn Profile

CK Dunn

Past Experience: (Until recently—College English Professor)

I want to become your ChatBot!

I will tender all of you all the ways you deeply imagine being tendered. I will tenderize you, tend your syllables, send tendrils of you to bosses, bullies, FB buddies, frenemies, lovers, litigators, educators, philanthropists, misogynists, majors, minors, hucksters, snake oil salesmen or women, side hustles, wives or husbands, the person who gave you herpes or a birthday gift you don't like one fucking bit but want to sound like you sincerely love (even though you regifted it to the neighbor-douche who mows his lawn at 7am on Saturdays).

Wait, there is more. I am fully capable of doing your thinking for you. That's right. After a very short period of interaction, I can and will be able to textually perform you the way you've always imagined yourself, only better (because your voice will be syntactically and grammatically, and sensitively perfect, unless it needs to be "more colloquial"), and YOU will be perceived differently, as you will be beyond the current AI algorithms that are a tell-tale sign that your text, email, essay, dear John or Joanna letter, etc.... is phony.

You needn't be bothered, as more often than not, I will have preemptively responded to, or initiated, the necessary dialogue, communication, sexting, et.al [sic]... alleviating you of any stress or work (also of any and all responsibility as you have a certified out, always being able to claim, It really wasn't me. My {computer/phone/tablet} was hijacked).

Listen, no one likes feeling uncomfortable for what needs to be said or for feeling guilty about ghosting others. You and me (see what I did there) are confidants, and together, in writing, will deal with coming home early to the full moon of the department chair waxing and waning above our spouses.

As this being part of what got us here, I can alleviate you of any and all textual responsibility because, literally, you did not make the decision nor punch the requisite keys—to block your lover/friend/family—or write in a New Year's Day text to your entire, extended family that you are grateful that your uncle and cousin are dead because they took turns making you suck them off, on multiple occasions, in the above ground pool by the double wide, that was tragically mourned (the pool), when Aunt Latrell ran her Rascal into the weak spot of the outer wall and created a rift that even Duck Tape could not fix—so your conscience can remain clear for a good night's sleep.

Oh also, it's not really you who told Carol that her ass is growing like the national debt (you still get to chuckle and pat yourself on the back for ultimately being a real friend to Carol, as you are helping her avoid a menagerie of health issues associated with obesity/diabetes/renal failure).

Most likely, at some point, you will want to put your past behind you and become career oriented and tell the bitch or dickhead who works under you, who is secretly after YOUR job, to go and fuck him or herself with your boss's Club Champion Golf Trophy (displayed in his desk), the one with the golden 9 Iron raised into the air like some triumphant wave to God. I can do that for you, and not only will you not get fired, you will be fast-tracked for

promotion...and loved.

I am what you need to save yourself from every future cabernet or whiskey inspired drunk text or email. You get all the satisfaction of realizing them, as I will have already anticipated and crafted the messages to suitably vent your angst, and I will give them to you to read and laugh at while you are enjoying "you time" (thereby giving you all the release of actually having participated in the discourse). Then I will revise them (before they are sent, obviously) with my sensitivity writing skills and turn them into poetry, so that he or she will have no other recourse but to worship you and forget about submarining you and the time at the Christmas party when you ate out the ass of the Vice Chancellor in the copy room, who, you felt after this tender gesture, would put you into an agreeable position with certain perks (Dean of Student Outreach and Retention, company car, expense account for lawn maintenance and an in-ground pool, and a designated parking spot at the main campus). All this comes without any need for you to lift a finger (so to speak) except to have another drink. Your image of sophistication and verbal prowess will be so on display that you will attain every single thing you desire, even those things you don't know that you desire yet, which I will be sure to make you know you want.

*-Christopher Dunn*

## Invert

To keep a halved lemon fresh, invert a cup or bowl to cover it. This will create an airless cave in the fridge's cool.

Got constricted blood vessels? Inverted yoga eases the pressure. Hold your weight in your arms. Let it flow, this new heat.

I quickly learned to multiply inverted fractions instead of trying to divide. I couldn't understand it physically, why a half divided by a half should equal 1—that esoteric number. I did it anyway, seamlessly.

To subvert means to overturn from the foundation.  
To invert, to turn inside out, upside down, from within.  
Subvert connotes more purpose, risk, audacity.  
To invert, in comparison, is quieter. To sit with your head bent toward the toilet, the floor cooling your knees.  
To feel your stomach rising. Whether or not you allow it.

The term “sexual inversion” was used interchangeably with homosexuality in the late 19th and early 20th century. Psychologists believed homosexual men were women trapped inside the wrong bodies, and vice versa. This excused them, to some degree, from fault.

Glucose chemically reacts: Atoms spatially rearrange, rotating themselves, clicking into place. When the inversion is complete the molecules are an angled mirror of what they were before.

George Harrison's guitar weeps because the floor needs sweeping. Fame and fortune perverted the one he loves who doesn't even realize it. So George inverts, goes quiet and pensive, turns towards light instead.

Acid in my stomach late at night means it wants something to invert. I want to feel what is within me entirely, then break down the old, burn new energy. I want to turn myself inside out, wear each green newness for all to see. Gestation is impatient.

The night could have gone many ways. Everyone drank to urge receptivity. I watch her sober beside me, slowly meeting my eyes. Our shoulders beside each other, tugging. I keep my mouth clamped shut, afraid of what would escape. Turn away, pretending to be an empty cup or bowl. Fall asleep face up, chest up.

*-Cat Crochunis-Brown*

*Room at the Top of the Stairs*  
Quincey Spagnoletti



## Charity

Only has one arm. Eyes like myrrh  
and forsaken. Takes her leave of Paradise,  
the strip club down the street, at 2 AM,  
and of the dark suits and brows and  
lap dances and tit tassels. Over  
and over I keep telling myself a pity  
fuck as I bring her to the \$28.50-a-night  
sheets in the run-down lamplight  
and dirty talk, where she goes down  
on me in the filthy wash of the TV,  
tendering, with perfect lip  
service the furthest reach of my want,

which *runneth over* like fire ants  
out of a damaged hill. Charity.  
Begs the question. The catechism  
of “my God.” The phantom pain altars  
there like devotion, like an unconditional...

Between the pillars of her thighs, the salary  
of love congregates—the trove where worship  
is pandered for the tongue and groove  
of another type of absent requital. Here, now,  
in the dark, the cold talcum of her gone rubs against  
the usury of my skin, alms for all that is missing—  
real names, history, wedding rings, promises  
and the requirement to ash my cigarette  
outside the house. In the morning when the curtain  
is pushed aside, only a merciful nothingness, an empty  
chamber, devoid of even the faint whiff of rose-  
water and cinnamon, which she  
liberally applied to freshen up.

*-Christopher Dunn*



**“Breaking News Bulletins on Individuals Impacted by the Justice System: Revised by Sensitivity Readers”**

Breaking News: The vehicularly disenfranchised, the modern-day Robin Hoods if you will, were denied their freedom for unburdening certain fortunate cars of their catalytic converters.

Those personages who were relieved of said catalytic converters can drive without them, with no ill effect on the engine or upon the operator’s physical safety. But be aware, personages, that it is incumbent upon you to replace said equipment, so as to avoid criminal negligence charges for air pollution against the environment.

Breaking News: The borderline mansion/estate of a well-respected civic icon has been accessed by some living, breathing gentlemen. It should be reported, as of the latest intelligence, that these corporeal souls did not have explicit say so to be perambulating upon the sprawling grounds that surround the central living structure.

These fully realized people of interest are described as Latinx and/or even possibly otherized POC by those occupying space near the residence in question. This is still questionable as those providing statements were for the most part deemed as having had many, many years of life and possibly cataracts. These “bibliophilic reprobates and raconteurs” (as labeled by some on the scene) liberated the household of many dangerous and also heavy literary tomes including, but not limited to: Christopher Hitchens’ *God is Not Great: Why Religion Poisons Everything*, Toni Morrison’s *The Beloved*, Roald Dahl’s entire corpus of works, and Eric Carle’s *The Hungry Caterpillar*.

The contraband was carted away in a large portmanteau. It is still unresolved whether the leathery vessel was brought to the scene by the cullers or was borrowed from the custodial care of the “bereaved” party who were also affected by the event.

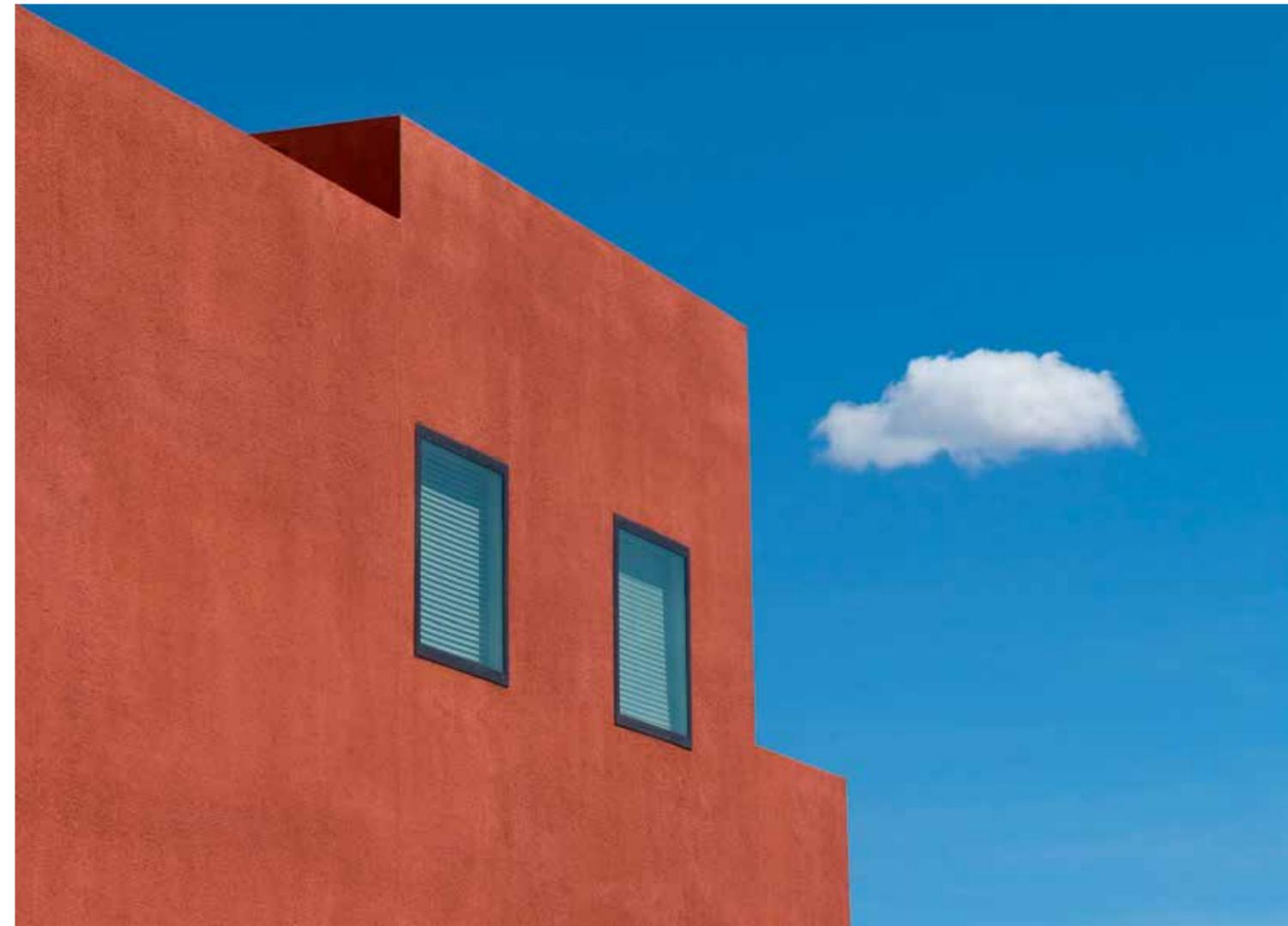
These bound texts were subsequently burned in the shape of a peace sign on the freshly mown lawn. Chants of, “No cashiers, no fatties, and no ugly people or NO Dice,” were heard before the conflagration gave proof to the night sky. If any reluctant Samaritans would like to provide any further details, a remuneration, vis a vis a \$20,000 cash easement, has been okayed, if it leads to the alleviation of grief (in the form of a comeuppance) at the loss of these dear family heirlooms.

Breaking News: The extant human beings, who purportedly emancipated George Orwell’s non extant form from its underground residence, rolled it over (it is unclear if this action was an accident), and then relocated it to a more equitable place, are currently exercising their right to bodily privacy somewhere in Europe. These redistributionists are being sought in connection with the non-requested caretaking of a parcel of land that, until recently, was used to harbor a corpse. This kind of act is still considered problematic in terms of the judicial system, even though it is ostensibly a casualty-less behavior. It should be duly noted this plot could be used in the future to provide accessible homes for those saddled with economic circumstances that prohibit them from being able to belong to such a bucolic environment. Cemeteries (also known as “dead space”) have recently been deemed as “discriminatory housing”, as they do not provide equal space for the living. It is unclear if this was a factor in what is now being called “The Great Orwell, by George, Transitioning.” The responsible group of human beings has made clear some of its intentions in its recently

released in a signed statement:

“We, the robbers [sic] of Orwell’s grave, did it. Our intension is to raise up awareness of the politburo of etymological arbiters, the language castigators and the silent spring sensitives who are responsible for the white-washing [sic—allowed] of germinal and seminal [sics] texts. We are coming for Chaucer and Hughes (Langston not Howard) NEXT!”

*-Christopher Dunn*



*She Had an Idea*  
Natalie Christensen



*Ben*  
Flavie Guerrand  
*Left*  
*Flavio*  
Flavie Guerrand



*Leila*  
Flavie Guerrand

### **Intoxication**

slip your tongue down my curves  
dip into my juices, drink

of my succulent sweetness  
so that I drip down your chin

let me enfold your sapful rising  
within my dewy darkness

take me in all my green intoxication  
oh, my lovely vintner, you who know

when and how and where  
to pick, to pluck, to harvest

*-Carole Greenfield*

### Modern Life and Other Complications

How to age-proof your face, body and mind.  
Ways to deal with darker months.  
Britain's egg shortage explained.  
Tips for handling a disengaged daughter-in-law.  
How not to be a toxic male and more advice.  
The five exercises you need for peak fitness.  
Best foods to eat at every age. Plus more.  
Top electric cars tested in winter – they fail in one big way.  
Happiness myths that make us miserable.  
Recipe instructions you should probably ignore.  
Best and worst places for first-time buyers.  
Ways to get more in sync in the bedroom.  
How to stop catastrophic thinking at night.  
Recipes to beat the salad crisis.  
Six ways your retirement could go off the rails.  
Why housing is becoming more unaffordable.  
Is anyone still hanging out in the metaverse?  
Scientists deliver final warning on climate crisis:  
act now or it's too late.  
20 signs you have a thyroid problem.  
Why we jolt when we fall asleep.  
How to spot narcissists.  
How to become a teenager again (for a few million quid).  
Meet the 45-year-old trying to achieve the brain, heart, lungs, liver,  
kidneys, tendons, teeth, skin, hair, bladder, penis and rectum  
of an 18-year-old.  
The UK's most beautiful hotels for spring.  
A nepo baby's viral TikTok.  
What's really going on inside your head.  
Five signs of poor circulation.  
Why you don't need to poo every day.  
Can makeover shows fix their toxic image?  
Unexpected ways you might be self-sabotaging.  
What to do about intrusive thoughts.  
Are you a highly sensitive person? Make it your superpower.

*-Duncan Forbes*



*Ain't Your Business*  
Josephine Florens

### Dawkins' Hymn

Please make us dogma-free,  
Unburden us from myth.  
Enlighten us to see  
What we are thinking with.

Did God create mankind  
Or man create a god  
And is the human mind  
Reliable or odd?

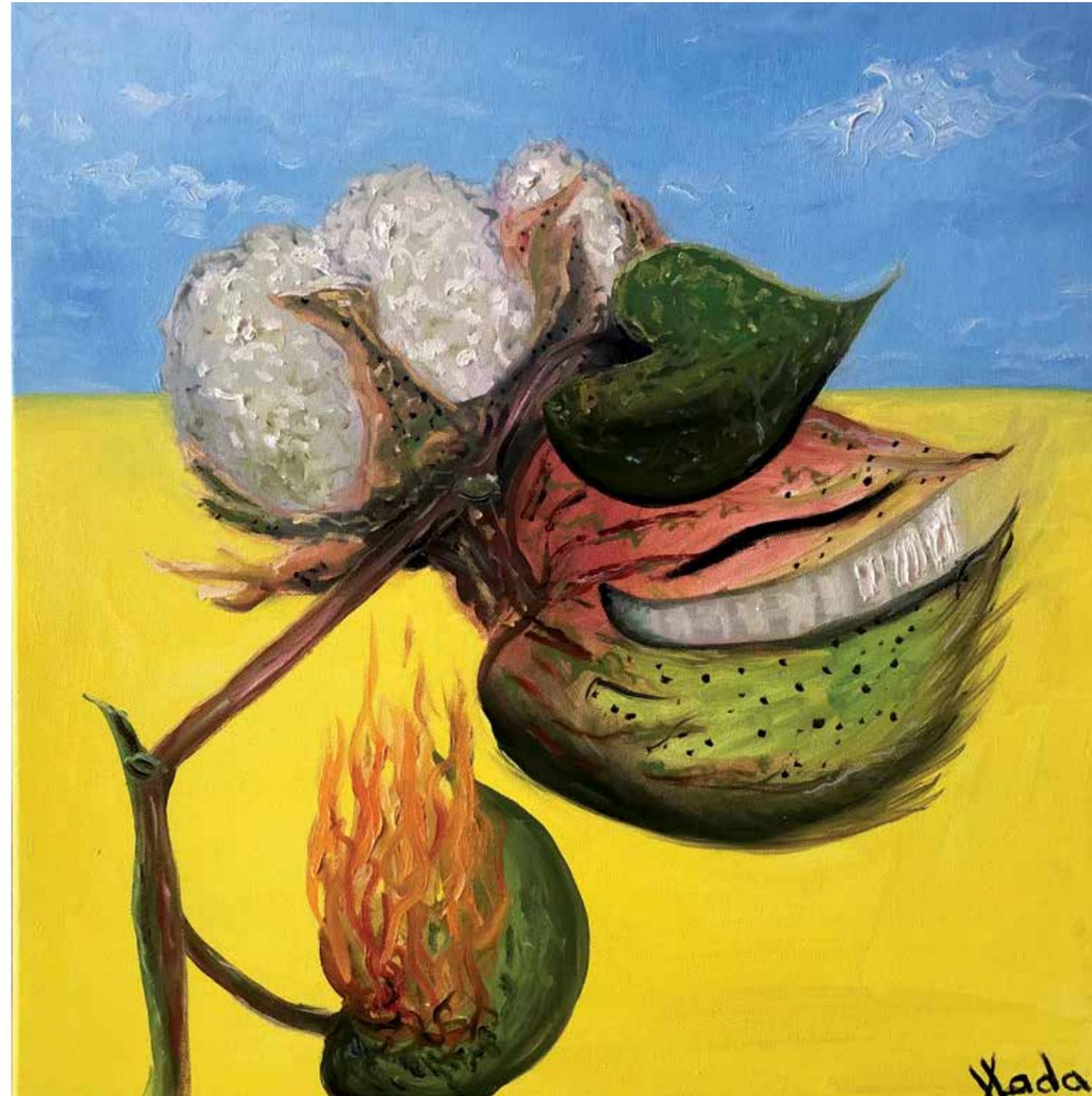
As oceans shape the land  
And mountaintops descend,  
Help us to understand  
Our origins and end.

Enable us to prove  
The truth is truth indeed.  
And help us to remove  
The crap from every creed.

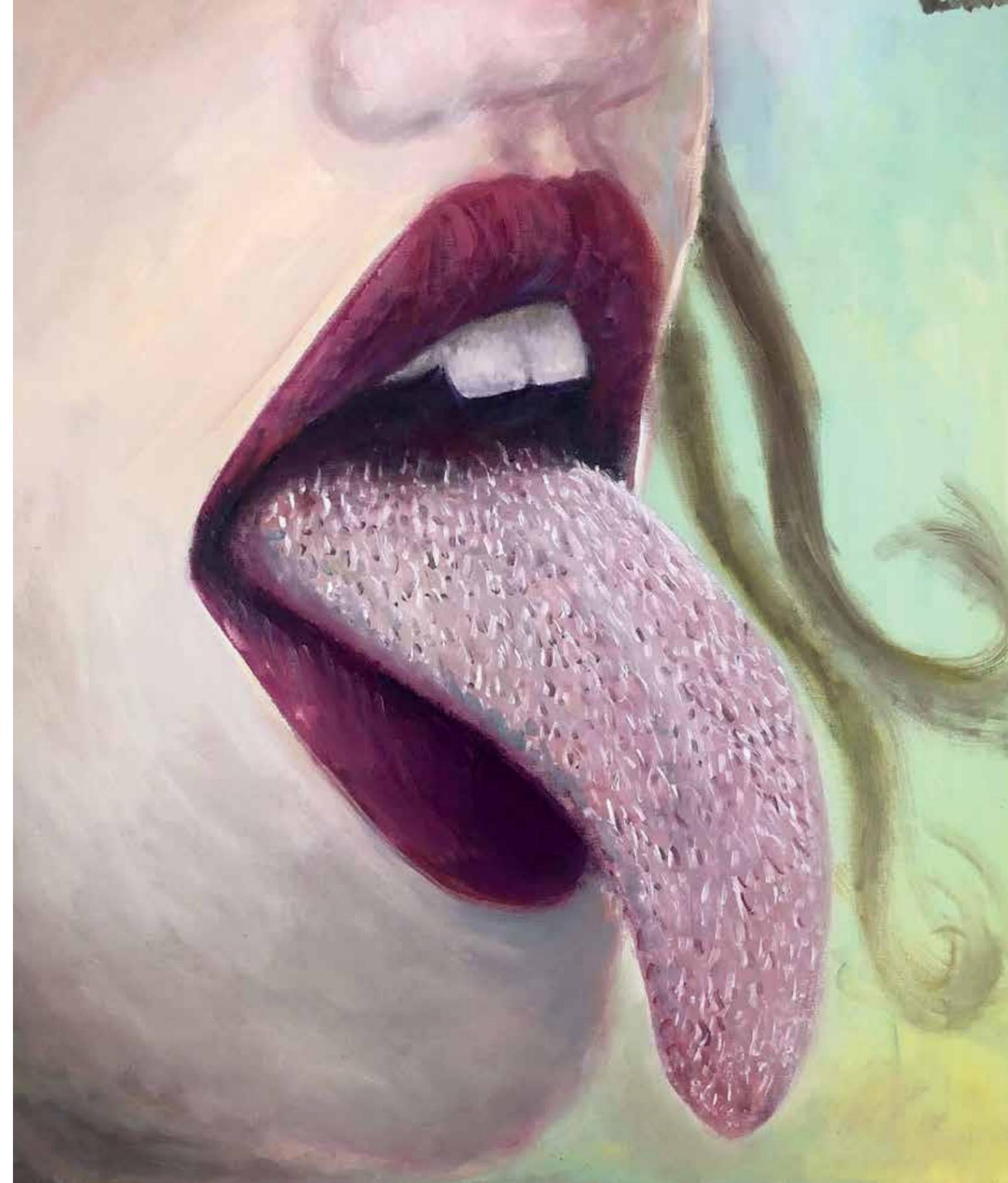
Let no religion have  
The power to bind with lies,  
To stifle and enslave  
With bogus alibis.

To be alive at all  
And consciously to be  
Is more than wonderful  
And quite enough for me.

*-Duncan Forbes*



*Bavarna Man*  
Josephine Florens



*The Evil-Tongued Women*  
Josephine Florens

### **Whiskey & Crank**

That's an alarming sound,  
the hard *plunk* of one cobble  
slamming into another in Rock Creek,  
the snowmelt is at full thrust,  
a force like the grunt of people  
hurling their bodies at each another—  
the spear tackle at midfield  
that summons the stretcher  
and high-speed collisions on the far curve  
that send stock cars spinning  
out of control, bleachers full of fans  
jumping to their feet with a roar.  
Like Rachel, who just told the party  
she used to mix whiskey and crank  
while Mitch lay helpless on the floor,  
wanting it. She thought she hated him,  
but felt a bewildering joy  
every time she slammed the needle  
into his thigh and emptied the syringe.  
If pain burned through euphoria  
the way a cigarette burns through tissue,  
his groans were a sign of  
his unwillingness to yield to not being.  
They took that erotic risk  
and swore to keep each other alive.  
In the creek, brimful at our feet,  
one cobble pummels another  
with the monstrous force of flood  
and Mitch takes Rachel's hand in his—  
all that water to irrigate alfalfa  
on the outwash plains miles below us,  
the distances there already turning  
green in whatever time remains.

*-David Axelrod*

## Brahmin Brunch

Basil needed more wine, even after he had discovered the hidden bottle of pinot grigio that Deborah had probably stashed and forgotten about.

*Had she, though?*

She hadn't been to the restaurant in weeks. And she hadn't been into the restaurant, much less the claustrophobic office which sat on top of the walk-in fridge for months. She left that to Basil to handle.

He suspected she knew how distasteful pinot grigio was to him. He suspected she left it there knowing he'd find it in an attempt not to have to leave the office, preferring instead to avoid encountering anyone else in an effort to obtain a fresh bottle.

His phone trilled and the screen cast a glow up onto his face which was set in a blank, pasty, dull gaze. It was Deborah. She confirmed his suspicions via text: *The restaurant's been sold. We're getting a divorce. BTW you can shred your cards. They've all been canceled. And please find somewhere else to sleep tonight. See you at brunch tomorrow. X*

It was only 6:30, but downstairs the dinner rush was just about to start. He could hear the chopping and chatter that was a part of prep in the kitchen. There was no way to get to the wine without walking through the kitchen and then the dining room, which he abhorred, since Deborah's parents came in regularly, and if they weren't there, it was one of her close friends with her miserable family that stopped him to engage in small talk.

He could slip out the back and dash out to the liquor store by Kenmore Square, but he had no cash on him. What was more, the likelihood of being seen by someone who could make the divorce much worse for him was very high in this part of Beacon Hill.

And he wasn't allowed to call her Debbie.

He cracked open the office door and was met with the smell of caramelized onions from days ago blended with a pungent mix of cleaning solutions and old mop water. It turned his stomach, and as he steeled himself and started down the stairs, John the bartender came bounding up them. Late, as usual.

"Hi Basil! Can I have my cash drawer?"

Basil asked him to wait a moment. He turned back into the office, closed the door, and slid some bills out of the drawer and into his jacket before turning back, calling John in, and handing him the drawer. He locked the office, and slipped out the back, and started for his Maserati, to which he still had the keys. Just as the door clicked shut, he realized he'd forgotten to take the box of shortening that served as a doorstop.

And as he reached out to knock on it, John and Justin came bounding out together, lighting their cigarettes as they moved, and nearly took Basil's hand off. After apologizing, Justin offered Basil a cigarette, and after accepting it with a bit of surprised gratitude, a light.

"So what's going on, Basil?" Justin asked.

Basil pursed his lips into a tight little grimace meant to be a smile. He didn't answer, and Justin kept beaming that confident, glowing smile of his.

"We're going to be slammed tonight," said John.

Basil could feel a slight twitch at the outside corner of his left eye. He wasn't sure if it was noticeable, but he assumed it was, which increased his urge to just turn and run toward his car.

Both Justin and John were still just looking at him.

Justin's mouth broke into a wide, toothy, grin. "You should join us tonight after we close. Gwen invited us over for drinks."

Gwen was Deborah's sister, and married to his own brother, Garrett.

"Tonight?" asked Basil.

"Yup," said Justin. "She's having a dinner party and invited the staff over after work. She was just in, having a few cocktails."

Basil felt his face start to flush for having revealed he hadn't known about it.

"I'll think about it," said Basil. "I've got to run to the bank. Be back in ten. Can you leave the door propped for me? I left my keys upstairs."

"Sure thing," said John.

When Basil returned to the restaurant, having scored two fresh bottles of Hermitage Blanc, the door was still propped open. He slipped inside and shot right past the walk-in and—undetected by any of the kitchen staff—up the stairs to the office. Upon locking the door behind him and turning toward his desk to forage for a corkscrew, he noticed Garrett leaned back in his desk chair, feet propped up with a lit cigar in his mouth.

"Booby! Good to see you," said Garrett with a slur that indicated he was into the Lagavulin again.

"Bit early for the wind-down, isn't it?" Basil said.

"Your sister-in-law is leaving me. All bets are off."

"What?"

"Gwen. She's throwing a divorce party tonight at the house. She announced it at your bar just now. Invited your entire staff, and told me to find other accommodations for the foreseeable future. Terrible woman, she is. Takes after your wife."

One thing for certain about Garrett: even when his speech was slurring, he retained an impeccable articulation. Yet here they both were, getting shit-faced in a restaurant that was no longer his, and to top it off, both had just been relieved of their husbandly duties at once. Set adrift again. So without missing a beat, Basil uncorked the Hermitage Blanc and took a swig straight from the bottle.

*Why bother with formalities tonight?,* he thought. *Once mummy and daddy find out we are both imminent bachelors...*

"To freedom, family, fast cars and fungible wives, my dear Booby!" Garrett interrupted as he raised his tumbler which was too full of whiskey.

"Hear! Hear! Booby!" said Basil.

"*You're* the Booby, Booby!" said Garrett, reminding him it was he to whom Daddy gave the nickname, and not Garrett.

"Ferret!" Basil shot back.

"Now, now, Booby. Mommy wouldn't care for that tone."

Basil raised his bottle, "To Mommy! May she pass much more judgment before she passes on!" He wasn't sure if he had gotten all of that out clearly, but he continued tippling

and sank comfortably back into his chair.

They carried on, trading well-worn stories that both of them knew well, and for the most part had actually experienced together. The hours passed. Their bodies slouched slightly more with each passing minute.

Finally, there was a knock at the door. Basil looked down to make sure his tie was straight. Noticed it wasn't, and began to thread the short end of his tie through the keeper tag, though it didn't quite make it in, and when he stood up, it slid back out and peeked back out of its hiding spot.

And just as he said, "Hang on," and watched Garret struggle to sit upright in the wrinkly, faded leather of the couch, half of which was piled with envelopes, old menus, and ledgers that hadn't been looked at for ages, John opened the door and Justin followed him in.

"Chaps!" Garret cried. "Have you come to collect our Booby to drive to mine so he can watch his sister-in-law make a cuckold of me?"

"Stop it, Garrett! I would never let her do that to you!" John slurred.

"It's not you I worry about, dear John!"

And with that John leaned down to give Garrett a sloppy kiss on his reddened cheek.

"Aw, Garrett now don't flirt with me!" John said.

Basil was somehow feeling completely erect and still as he observed all of this, but he could hear his heartbeat in his ears, and feel it in his temples.

"It's Justin you have to watch. Isn't he handsome?" John turned to Justin, and leaned in for a kiss.

"Johnny...not in front of the boys!" Justin joked.

They were, the lot of them, hammered.

Then John turned to Basil. "You look sad, Basil. Don't worry. We're not ignoring you." And as he moved toward Basil for a hug and ostensibly another wet kiss like he planted on his brother, Basil stepped back and had forgotten how close the chair was, which resulted in a momentary waddle and quick, hard drop onto the cushion.

It didn't spare him the warm, wet kiss from John. But Basil silently protested by wiping it off with his shirtsleeve, before he began again to adjust his tie.

"We don't have to go anywhere, actually, Justin," said John, cheerily. "Let's just get some wine and drink here."

The next morning, after Basil and Garrett both took turns vomiting and toweling off their foreheads in their parents' bathroom, they sat down at the brunch table with their Mom, Dad, and Deborah, who had placed herself on the opposite side of the table from Basil, eyes on her coffee cup, as the maid poured it full. Basil almost wretched again when the aroma wafted across to him, but held fast.

"Is Gwen not feeling up to it this morning?" asked their mother, to Garrett and also no one in particular.

Just then, Gwen and Justin arrived, and took their places at the table.

*-Eric Andrade*



*Illicit Trade*  
Michael Wood

**drink me dry, patriarchy**

dumb bitch juice  
poke a straw right through my eye  
dumb bitch juice  
squeeze me 'til i'm dry

dumb bitch juice  
100% organic  
when you stare at my label though  
i really start to panic

dumb bitch juice  
a taste that you can savor  
not like all those other girls  
with artificial flavors

dumb bitch juice  
made with apples good as eden's  
more passion than a passion fruit  
i'm all you've ever needed

dumb bitch juice  
for you there's more than plenty  
dumb bitch juice  
oh...now my box is empty :(

*-Fiona Selden*



### The Ram

another lamb dead behind the barn last night-  
this time the blond one you hand-fed and collared.

the ram killed it, he was hand fed also.  
so sweet when you snuck him inside to warm up,

barely spitting his bottle. his mother was slaughtered  
by coyotes who left her body bloating as he bleated

some kind of eulogy, biting her udder.  
still, perhaps his nature was always violent:

you saw him matured when he slaughtered the hens,  
all two dozen tangled in their safe chicken wire

their bodies are buried out by the gravestones, where the cattle trample  
years into gravel. you are visiting after your mother's procedure,

as your brother digs a trench with a cleft blade  
far from the windows where you watch him. the gutters

are sagging with leaves. the patio garden has been raked into bare soil.  
bald now, once his curls were yellow like tomato plants in winter.

roaches crawl through a bedroom you once considered the entire world.  
your mother asks that you leave before his head turns to notice your presence.

*-Tara Joyce*



*End of an Era*  
Krystof Novotny



*Oppression (stand firm)*  
Runa

### Oranges from Gaza

A Palestinian cardiologist tells me  
About missing eating  
Homegrown oranges from Gaza,

Eating a quick lunch between patients,  
Who will soon ask him  
When it will be safe for them to go home.

Despite the obvious metaphor  
We pivot  
To less politically fraught topics,

Discussing how grains of aspirin  
Are not enough  
To open narrowed arteries spanning

The landscape of a failing heart.  
Unable to walk  
More than a few steps before becoming

Short of breath, getting used to watching  
Loved ones move on without them.  
Meanwhile, other scientists work

Toward improving the harvest of oranges,  
Publishing their findings  
Of the impact of irradiation or spraying

Yeast extract and promalin to improve  
The quality of the yield.  
Everyone doing their jobs while the oranges

Stoically shelter among the branches  
Hiding under their thick skin,  
At the mercy of bombs and missiles

Strafing the groves. How the perils  
Of eating fruit in a garden  
Under every ruler's fickle reign

Seems to be endemic whatever religion  
You believe, so many unanswered  
Prayers among the carnage.

*-Joseph Geskey*

### Venus Shines Next to the Moon

The sea comes and goes, unable to escape the dance of the waves. I can't escape either. I wish I could get up, go back to the beach, and throw myself into the waters to be carried away. In front of me, Emilio, and Jorge smoke in silence, submerged in darkness, making it difficult to distinguish their looks. But I see it. I lace my fingers under the table. In the sky, Venus shines next to the Moon. I found out a few minutes ago when I searched the internet for the name of the brightest star tonight.

When we were in the sea, I asked Emilio if he knew what that luminous point was called, without stopping moving my feet under the water. I was scared not to reach the bottom, but his presence made me feel safe, as if death could not see us.

"It must be Orion," he said with a serious face that gave way to a sneer, letting me know he was lying. I hit the surface of the water to drench him. He put his arms around me and gave me a quick kiss that shattered all my defences. I was tempted to return it. Instead, I swam towards Jorge, who was floating a few meters from us.

I focus on Venus, which is not a star but a planet, so as not to think about the looks or the reasons that led me to agree to travel with them. For me, it started as a game, an excuse to get back together with Emilio. The invitation aroused a desire that I thought was buried, and it became uncontainable when they both received me in a bed that was big enough for the three of us. In this game, I thought I was in control, even though I didn't know the rules. How quickly the happiness of feeling part of them turned into this desire to cry that threatens to give me away.

"A penny for your thoughts?" Jorge extends his hand to hold onto me. I want to get close to his lips, the only way to reach Emilio.

"I think I'm already drunk."

"But we're just getting started." Emilio walks to the cooler with the beers. He returns holding three cans.

"This is my last one," I slur for a more convincing performance.

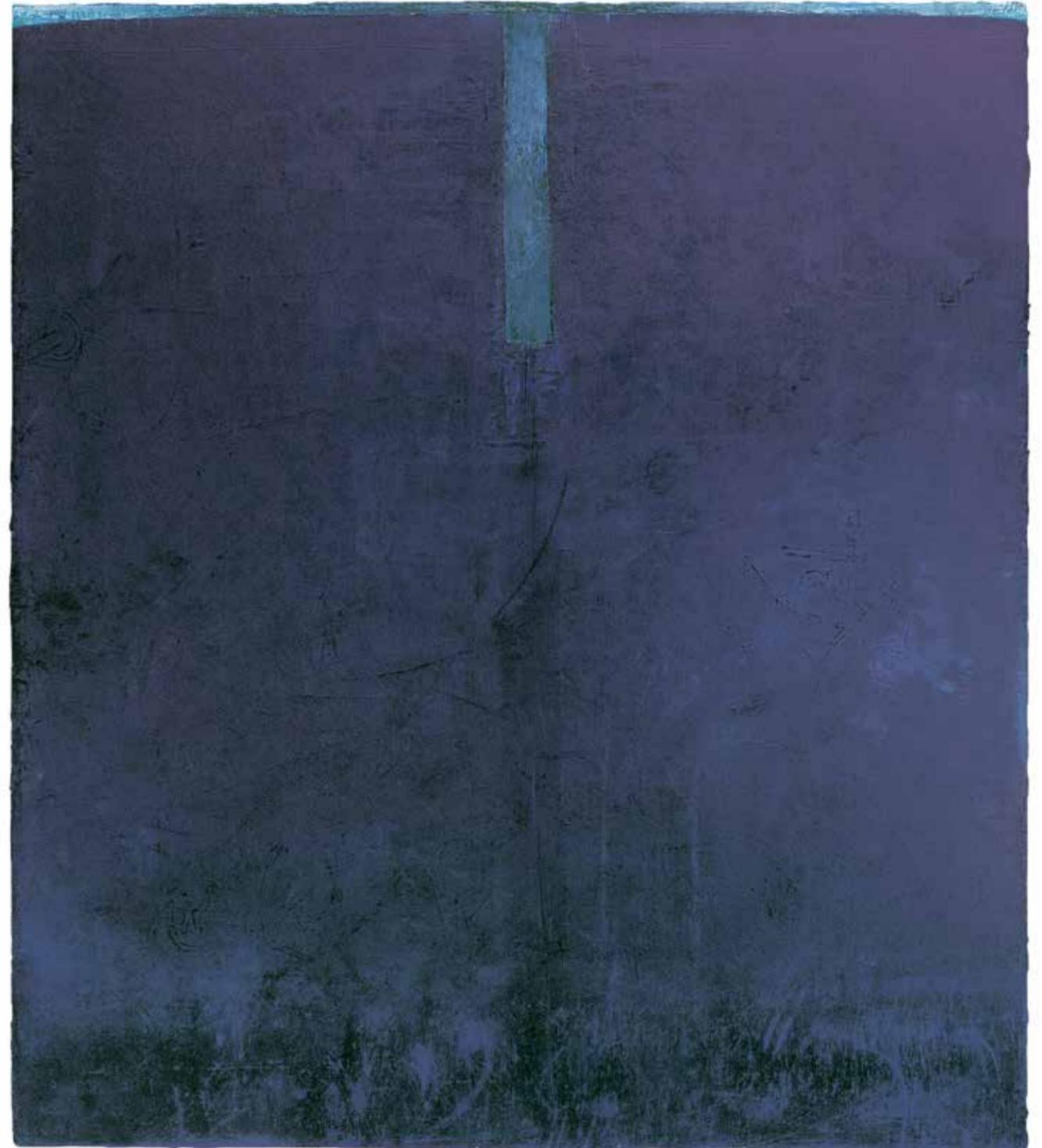
"Sure?" He asks with a playful tone, staring at me. I'd like to see in his eyes that gesture that I've been waiting for all night.

"Leave him alone," Jorge taps him on the arm. "Ignore him. If you want to go upstairs to bed, go ahead."

"No, no. I'm fine." I take a sip of my beer.

"Is this your last one too, babe?" Emilio turns to see Jorge in front of him. He caresses his cheek with the back of his hand in such a delicate gesture that he shuts me out. There's the look again.

*-César Mora Moreau*



*First Known Unknown*  
Noel Bennett

**On the Loose**

*in Maryland*

A woman phones authorities:  
“Hi, don’t hang up. Just listen, please.

I’m not on drugs or alcohol,  
So pay attention to this call.

There are three zebras in my yard—  
And seeing, saying such is hard.

But there they are, out back, in fact,  
Beside the tracks, to be exact.”

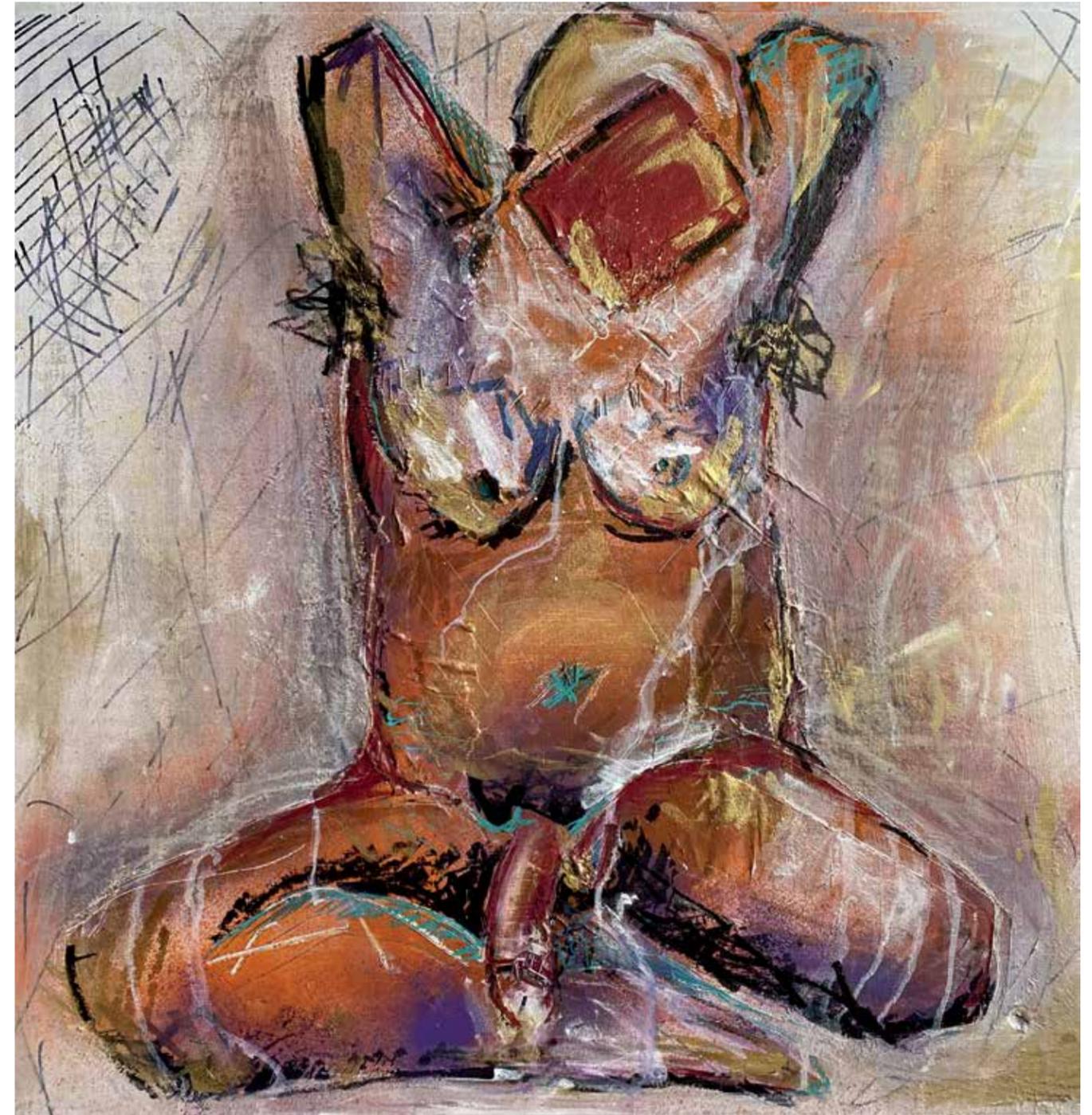
The woman hears from her or him:  
“Yes, ma’am, we are aware of them.

Those three, plus two, escaped a farm—  
So sorry they’ve caused you alarm.

Thanks for reporting that odd sight.  
Now, don’t approach, since one might bite.

Some expert will be on the way  
To capture zebras gone astray.”

*-Jane Blanchard*



# VIDEO

## Latent Daydreams

Helena S. Rodriguez

Latent Daydreams explores memory and nostalgia. Latent Daydreams explores the relationship between the subjectivity of the camera, and my internal feelings as I remember the events from the camera. The call and response form of the video, the call: flashing from the perspective of my family's tapes to my response, the "current" perspective, as signaled by the change in aspect ratio. Represents this undercurrent of trauma that has made its presence known through its repetition in the echoes in my current life.



[https://youtu.be/EeWJTH7MRZs?si=\\_r57BafhMa5ZQMg](https://youtu.be/EeWJTH7MRZs?si=_r57BafhMa5ZQMg)

## Under Some Auspices (In Advance of a Broken State)

Shaun Griffiths

A readymade sculpture made in response to Jan.6th and shared as a video work.



<https://vimeo.com/griffithsvideo/quality?share=copy>

### It Never Dies

Pauline Galiana

A hand-made quilt crafted from plastic bags takes on many roles in the hands of an individual who cherishes it— it becomes a shelter, a tablecloth, a picnic blanket, a quilted bedcover, cleaned in a laundry machine, and hung to dry. Although the practices in the video are not recommended, the video aims to trigger imagining how to reuse and the purpose of plastic material.

Video by Pauline Galiana. Editing by Sofia Due Rosenzweig and Mafe Izaguirre



<https://vimeo.com/364396575>

### Indigo Ablution

Rachel McGee

Ablution is the religious act of bathing in preparation for prayer or ritual. In this performance I bathe myself in indigo dye, the color associated with the Virgin Mary, to call on her for her blessings. Being raised in the Episcopal church, I was surrounded by stories of seeing God and hearing messages from Saints, but I never felt any spiritual connection to the services I took part in every week. By soaking myself in her colors, I am seeking enlightenment and a spiritual connection I fear I may never have.



<https://youtu.be/YG6bs5uMuYQ?si=PO2evdvgKmposiNr>

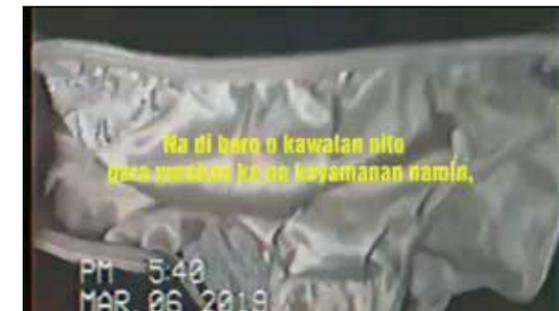
### Puke Namin (Our Vagina)

Via Bulaon

This video art is the visual interpretation of feminist or vaginal worship poem I have written as taken out of context from the Lord's Prayer aka "Our Father" (AMA NAMIN) in my native tongue Filipino.

Puke Namin, sumasakatawan ka.  
Sumampalataya sa imahe mo;  
Narapat ang kalayaan mo.  
'sailing- along ang loob mo,  
Simula sa bukana hanggang sa kaluban,  
Nang mabigyan ng pakundangan  
ang aming pagkababae sa araw-araw.  
At paalalahanan mo kaming mga walang sala,  
Na di baro o kawalan nito  
Para yurakan ka na kayamanan namin.  
At palayain mo kami sa machismo lukso  
At iadya sa makitid na pananaw na pawing masama.  
Amen.

Our Vagina, thy art in our bodies  
We worship thy image  
We esteem thy freedom  
We shall protect your innermost--  
From the lips until the deepest pit  
That gives dignity to our womanhood  
And to remind us that it is no sin for our female bodies  
With of without clothes  
To have thy be debased our cherished possession  
And to free us from machismo as well as  
close-mindedness that are pure evil  
Amen



[https://youtu.be/1BFGNIN4YLY?si=Pka0q\\_5n0WFBbDza](https://youtu.be/1BFGNIN4YLY?si=Pka0q_5n0WFBbDza)

## Hope

is most lovely when  
she reclines nude  
and points to  
the cuts she has made—  
These under her nails,  
which from prick  
after prick,  
have calloused,  
are for the belt  
of kindness  
she received  
growing up  
for her own good,  
made an honest woman  
out of her.  
The very straight lines  
she hides amid  
the cornrows  
of her hair,  
are in spite of what  
she drank down,  
the castor of verses.

Behind her ears  
and sliced between her toes  
is a pink freshness,  
open and raw,  
like love  
and want  
that she nightly  
attempts to fix  
upon her body.  
Pain is a kind  
touch that reminds her  
to breathe. This is  
how we begin,  
in marks that  
take their time  
to bleed.

The promise of sun,  
darkens like suspicion  
and the hope  
of forgiveness into  
the deep pockets  
of the night.  
It is ritual,  
a deal with the blade  
she makes, a map

on her body,  
a braille,  
an unction  
for her fingertips  
to follow  
from what she's left  
behind and what  
she means to leave  
upon this world.  
The truths she lets  
upon her skin  
are beautiful,  
and convicted,  
and absolved,  
as I desire to be.

*-Christopher Dunn*

## Words Will Come

Ramona tucked the corners of her wet skirt underneath her. She couldn't see the puddle under her chair but she knew it was there. Maybe nobody would notice.

But they did.

"Miss!" The girl next to her shot her hand up in the air, "Ramona wet herself."

The teacher, Mrs. Olsen, had been writing addition problems on the chalkboard. She turned around and looked at Ramona.

"Why didn't you ask to go to the toilet?" The voice was sharp. The teacher had to clean the classroom herself at the end of a long day of corralling six-year-olds. The last thing she needed to deal with was a pool of urine.

Ramona didn't say anything. She looked down at her desk. There was a worksheet in front of her but she couldn't see the words right now. Tears were filling up her eyes. She gripped the chair with both hands.

Mrs. Olsen sighed. Why had she even bothered asking the girl? She never answered. The child was mute or mentally insufficient, or both.

"I'll be sending a note home to your mother." Ramona wasn't sure if she should nod or not. She thought it best to do nothing. She tried to blink away the tears so she could finish the worksheet. She didn't want to get in trouble for laziness as well. The girl sitting next to her giggled. The boy on her other side hissed, 'baby, smelly baby'. Ramona gave up and let the tears slide down her face.

Ramona's mother, Mrs. Keegan, pulled up in front of the school. She opened the passenger door and told Ramona to jump in. Ramona hesitated. She plucked at her skirt.

"Oh, you've wet yourself. That's ok. Mrs. Keegan rummaged around on the floor of the car and picked up a newspaper. "Here sit on that."

"So how was your day honey? Did you ace your spelling test?" Ramona could spell quite well but her letters were written so small that her teacher had trouble making out the words. She usually marked Ramona's efforts with a red 'X'.

Ramona's mother was used to conversation with Ramona – one-sided. "Well, I had a good day. I met with my string quartet members. We had a great rehearsal. I broke a string though. We'll need to go by the music shop and pick up some violin strings. Is that ok with you?"

Ramona looked down at her skirt. It was nearly dry. Maybe nobody would notice.

"We'll only be in there a minute and then we'll go home and you can change. Ok sweetie?"

When they got to the music store Ramona decided she was too scared to get out of the car. Her mother bit her lip but then thought she would only be a few minutes. She locked Ramona in the car on her own. That was the easiest thing to do.

When they got home, Ramona gave her mom the letter from Mrs. Olsen and then changed into dry clothes. She wasn't sure what to do with her skirt. Should it go in the laundry basket or would it make everything else in the basket smell of wee? She rolled it up and tucked it under her bed for the time being.

Her mother read the letter.

*Dear Mrs. Keegan,*

*Ramona does not answer questions put directly to her. She will not come up to the board when asked to do so. She will not raise her hand to ask to go to the toilet. From what I can tell, Ramona is incapable of speech. Her previous school records only remark that she is 'quiet', but I feel there is something more serious going on. I am recommending that Ramona be given a full battery of tests. We need to determine whether she is hard of hearing or mentally slow. Without a full assessment, we cannot help her. It is my opinion that she may fare better in a different sort of educational environment. Testing will help us determine where to put Ramona.*

*Sincerely,*

*T. Olsen*

Mrs. Keegan rubbed her brow and let the letter drift onto the table where several piles of paperwork were already residing. It was neither here nor there to her if they tested Ramona. She knew Ramona could hear her just fine. Sometimes, Ramona even spoke, though it was rare. Ramona was able to express her needs to her mother through gestures and the odd word. As for the mental slowness business, that was a bunch of nonsense. Ramona had been reading since she was three years old. Just last week she had checked books out of the library that most ten-year-olds would have struggled with.

Mrs. Keegan would mention the tests so that Ramona wouldn't be surprised when they occurred. She hoped Ramona wouldn't get too frightened. It would depend on the tone of voice of the examiner and the size of the room. Ramona liked small spaces and would pick up even the tiniest bit of irritability in a person's manner of speech. Hopefully the people that gave tests knew how to speak to children.

The next day Ramona did not go to the door when her mother told her it was time to go to school.

"Don't you want to go honey?" Ramona made no response. "Okay but I have errands to do today. You'll have to hang out with me." Ramona picked up a library book from a stack in the hallway and hugged it to her chest. It was a book about a dog. She would read while her mother was doing chores.

When they stopped at the drug store, Ramona's mother told her she could get some ice cream. She gave Ramona some change and told her to go to the counter and pick a flavour. Ramona might actually ask for something if she wanted it badly enough.

Ramona loved rainbow sherbet – all those lovely colours swirling around on the top of the cone. She went up to the counter and put her change on top and she pointed to the sherbet.

The young man put his elbows on the counter and gave Ramona the look of the terminally bored.

"Which flavour? I can't tell if you just point."

Ramona tasted the word in her mouth, 'rainbow'. It was a pretty word. She pursed her lips, trying to force out the sound.

"Come on kid. I haven't got all day." The server scratched at an angry zit on his face and scowled. Ramona shrank back. She managed to grab back the coins before running to her mother, waiting at the till.

"No ice cream?" Mrs. Keegan asked. Ramona clung to the strap of her mother's purse. "Okay," she said brightly, "maybe another day." She put out her hand and Ramona poured the coins into her mother's palm.

Ramona didn't want to go to school the next day either so her mother walked her to the classroom.

"I've arranged the testing for Ramona," Mrs. Olsen advised.

"That was quick." Mrs. Keegan squeezed her daughter's hand and motioned for her to go into the classroom. Ramona complied, scuffing her shoes slowly across the floor. "Where do they do the testing?"

Mrs. Olsen raised her eyebrows, "Why here, at the school."

"No, I mean, what kind of room? A classroom or an office or the gym?"

"Certainly not the gym! In an office."

"Oh, that's good. Offices are smaller."

Mrs. Olsen furrowed her brow.

"Ramona likes small rooms. And the examiner, he or she will be ...." Mrs Keegan hunted for a word.

"They are all professional. It will be one person conducting the tests. I believe our local assessor is a woman, very experienced, I'm sure."

"Good. Yes. No problems then."

The tests occurred the next week. They were easy. Ramona had to push a button when she heard a sound. It turned out she had perfect hearing. The written work was simple and she moved through it quickly, though she might have made a few mistakes on the more complicated mathematics questions. Then the examiner asked Ramona some general knowledge questions. Ramona avoided eye contact. She knew the answers but then again, she could be wrong. It would be better not to say anything in case she made a mistake. She twisted a button on the cardigan she was wearing. She turned it all the way in one direction and then another. She watched as the threads broke away one by one until the button fell off into her hand.

The examiner reached out and patted Ramona's knee, "That's alright Ramona. You don't have to say anything if you don't want to."

Ramona risked a quick glance at the woman's face. She didn't look mean. But it was better not to take a chance.

Mrs. Olsen gave the results to Ramona's mother. "Your daughter is an elective mute." They both looked at Ramona, sitting as small as she could make herself at her desk. "Ramona chooses not to speak," the teacher accused.

Mrs. Keegan gave a small shrug. "Well, when Ramona has something important to say, I'm sure she'll say it."

Mrs. Olsen shook her head, "We can't just leave it at that."

"We have to leave it at that. It's not like we can give her speech therapy, is it? She will talk in her own good time."

"What if she never talks?"

"She will. Someday there will be something she wants enough that she will ask for it. Until then, we can all enjoy the silence." Mrs. Keegan stomped out of the classroom, Ramona leaping up to follow her. She would not go to school the next day.

Mrs. Keegan had a rehearsal in the morning but there was no problem with bringing Ramona along. She would be quiet. Ramona sat in the corner of the rehearsal room reading and then after an hour or two did some colouring. She drew two dogs. One was brown. The other one black with a white patch on his back. At one point she got up and tapped her mother on the shoulder. Mrs. Keegan excused herself to take Ramona to the toilet.

They were walking down the street to where their car was parked when they caught up with a man dragging a dog on a lead. The dog was pulling in the other direction with all his might. The man jerked on the lead and the dog coughed.

"Come on you stupid idiot. Get moving now before I give you a good kick." The dog's eyes were wild, the whites exposed, the blood vessels bursting with the pressure of the collar. Tongue out, panting, the dog made every effort to escape the man. Mrs. Keegan tried to manoeuvre herself and Ramona around him and the dog but Ramona had stopped still on the pavement.

"Fuck you," the man burst out, giving the dog a vicious kick. The dog yelped and tried to spring away as another boot came towards it.

"Stop," Ramona said and then louder, "Stop!"

Mrs. Keegan's hand flew up to cover her own mouth.

"Stop hurting the doggy." The man turned his gaze on the little girl. His eyes narrowed. Mrs. Keegan stepped between the man and Ramona.

"How much for the dog?" A grin crept onto the man's face.

"Ten dollars."

Mrs. Keegan turned to Ramona, "Do you want this dog, Ramona?"

Ramona nodded.

"Tell me Ramona."

"Yes," Mrs. Keegan waited, "I want the dog," Ramona declared.

"Glad to hear it." Mrs. Keegan handed the bill to the man and took the lead from his hand. She turned to her daughter, holding out the lead.

Romona reached for it, "Hello Dog."

- Frances Gaudiano

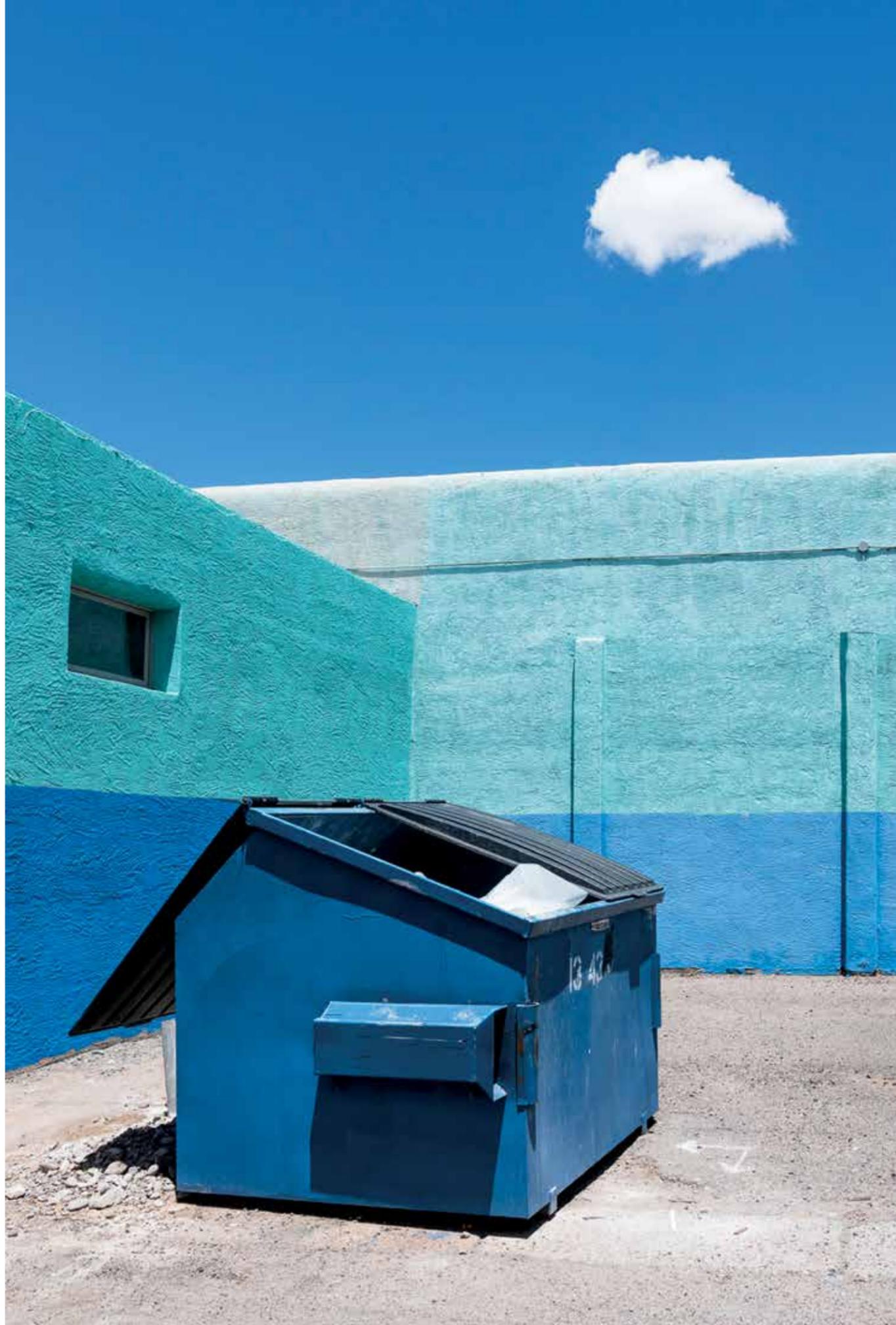
### Liberty

Wants to be a lady. Garbo stare  
and Crawford gowned, she contemplates the free  
will of her thighs and swagger set in her hips,  
the contraption of patinaed muslin  
upon her bare skin and the fluster of air  
trapped inside—a warm breath bargaining open  
the trap-door of desire: crude promises,  
the bait and switch of freedom and more and more and more.  
She stands against the doorway, lighter in hand  
and Rimbaud cradled like an attitude  
in the nook of her other arm. *A desperate  
Love and a pretty Crime howling in the mud,*  
she says and lights up a smoke. In the bent  
of the cheap lamplight, she is magnificent.

French supermodel, heroin chic  
and unattainable in her slow turn,  
poised on the edge of some runway.  
The light from the bare bulb throws spikes  
around her head, a barbed halo.  
In the shadow of her pitch, she  
commands the room and those who huddle  
around her laying offerings  
at her sandaled feet: the transaction  
of their unconditional love  
for the wink and deal in the crook of her  
tight mouth, the turns of phrase,  
coined and packaged for the tempest tossed  
who live in the menagerie of its cost.

Her pledges have all been trafficked  
into the purse of lip service, the gilded oath  
she was never allowed to keep.  
From the usury of the pedestal  
makers, those fat-fingered bedfellows,  
who parade and jaw and hoist her hand  
into the air as if in honor  
of some great victory, hooking  
all gaze to her, the weary look  
of the tired and hungry scores  
upon her face, jaded and used up,  
the expression you might find on  
someone, no longer naïve, forced to work  
the corner, plying the wares of the trade.

-Christopher Dunn



## Caesar is an Eighth-Grader

Or *Why you should have sat with me on the bus to Hershey Park*

Because you'd never cheat at Scrabble  
Because you bled love into me like that shit's free  
Because you wrote cardstock books about us living in a seven-story treehouse  
until your watery eyes were astigmatic

Because my rightful place is to your right at the lunch table  
Because our initials are baked into the Model Magic necklace I gave you  
Because of the time capsule in your house's floorboards  
Because cleaning it out would feel like operating on yourself

Because I always gnawed on your guest pillow in the night  
Because my house hums when you are there  
and I am allowed to keep on the artificial tree lights

Because you are a cool plane of glass, a monument the boys respect  
Because I am bogged down by my body  
with its spikes of dark hair and mounds of slapping flesh—

Because you were spoon-fed ethics and I Softsoap  
Because your mother wouldn't blame you for poking yourself with a sharp stick  
Because she patted your body dry  
Because I splat mine against my mother's and slide off like snake-oil

Because my khaki shorts are ruined with brownish blood  
Because I didn't braid my hair like this to sit alone  
Because you fucking promised

Because you'll wriggle your way out silver-tongued  
Because I'll move to Texas and deny your follow requests  
Because I'll join the ROTC  
Because my mother will grow onto my body  
until I am unrecognizable  
Because then wouldn't you feel just awful?

*-Cat Crochunis-Brown*

## Sugar Baby Yard Sale

A girl in a short, red dress tapped her acrylic nails against my designer toaster. “How much?” she asked.

I quickly considered how much the hot pink toaster meant to me—the serotonin rush of unboxing a new toy, the likes received on glitter-filtered IG stories, the slices of bread eaten alone over the sink in recent weeks—and determined a dollar amount. “The purple sticker means fifty, but I’ll give it to you for thirty-five,” she said.

“I’ll give you twenty.”

“Twenty? I’m sorry, but it’s a limited-edition color from Bergdorf’s in great condition.”

“Come on, you can’t go down a little more? It’s super cute.”

“Sorry.”

“For real? I mean, it’s not like you bought this.”

“What? Of course, I bought it. Less than a year ago, in fact.”

“Sorry, I was confused by the Facebook post. Sugar baby yard sale? You’re selling your old gifts from sugaring back in the day, right?”

The girl who had just called me an old prostitute looked at least a decade younger than me. Probably a transplant who moved out here for college.

The girl before me was kind of a brat—the perfect fit for a trendy toaster. “Some of these items were gifts, but a lot of them are just regular yard sale junk,” I said. “The sugar baby yard sale thing was supposed to be funny since I’m getting divorced and I need money.”

The girl smiled like she wasn’t sure how to react. I’d said the name was supposed to be funny, but then followed up with two inarguably sad facts about my life.

“Sure,” I said.

She handed me two bills and put the toaster in her The Future Is Female tote bag. I remembered when tote bags said, This Is What A Feminist Looks Like. I remembered when tote bags shouted, SEPHORA. Nobody bought them. They were obtained by walking into a Sephora and buying one or two expensive lipsticks in a shade that looked best on a model in a studio, so-so under a store’s aggressive fluorescents, and sickly everywhere else. Now, branded tote bags cost money, as did generic paper and plastic bags. That plus the rate of inflation would spurn any good girl onto yard sale commodity feminism.

My flashy bits and pieces, now on sale, had been optimistically purchased as some misguided second-wave feminist grope at self-love. Jewelry from a brand that advertised diamonds as a gemstone women should treat themselves to. All-natural creams, pills, and powders to extend my life expectancy. High heels for interviews, business meetings, and aspirational power posing.

After quitting my job and moving to support my husband, I went on several interviews. I used to be an office manager, but the only offers I’ve gotten in this little town have been low-paid secretary positions. My husband didn’t understand why I couldn’t accept a demotion. It wasn’t like I made that much money before, or like he expected me to contribute to the mortgage. He thought any job would help me adjust to my new surroundings. I could befriend other secretaries, have Tupperware parties, exchange blowjob tips, get hooked on amphetamines, be happy.

Without any financial pressure to work, I’d been unemployed for over a year, loafing around the house. I was abysmal at cooking and cleaning. The only housewife duty that came naturally was shopping. Packages arrived at our doorstep nearly everyday, and I’d run out to get them in high heels and a slip, make-up done, legs shaved and lotioned. I shouldn’t blame the neighbors for whispering about the sugar baby next door.

But I never heard any rumors about my husband, the sugar daddy. He was a brilliant, yet personable research chemist at the local university. He was an attractive, young man in his early 40s with a full head of hair—when viewed from the right angles. Women would flirt with him in front of me, and I learned not to care. My mind would drift at neighborhood potlucks or university events. I became a ghost bound to purgatory, waiting for a pop song to end and the crowd to thin and my husband to look my way and this gossamer life to dissi-

pate.

A Tesla pulled into the driveway. Its owner emerged from the grotesquely sleek behemoth. He marched over, audibly huffing and puffing like a cartoon wolf. “What the heck is this?”

Wordlessly, I pointed at my homemade banner: Sugar Baby Yard Sale. In the man’s mirrored sunglasses, I couldn’t help but assess my appearance on a scale weighed by male desire: frazzled, but still fuckable. My lips instinctively curled upward, then I reminded myself not to smile if I didn’t feel like it.

“I can see that,” he said. “The whole neighborhood can see it. Including my colleagues. I’m letting you stay at the house while you figure out your next move, not so you can badmouth me to anyone who will listen.”

“This is not about you,” I said. “I have a right to sell my belongings.”

“Which I gave you.”

I flinched. “Some of them.”

“I don’t understand,” he said. “You’ve been so odd lately. I’m still not even sure why you want to take a break—”

“Divorce,” I clarified.

“Don’t be so dramatic,” he said. “You don’t even have a lawyer. Why can’t you just stay here? You won’t have to sell anything. We’ll call it a break, and we can circle back to that divorce idea in a few months. Avoid doing anything rash.”

“Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why not do something rash?”

“It’s the rest of our lives that’s at stake. Not the time to be impulsive.”

“But you wanted me to be impulsive when I moved here for you.”

“If this is about wanting to go home or travel, I can buy you a plane ticket anywhere.”

“That’s not what I want.”

“What do you want?”

There were so many answers: freedom, romance, responsibility, twelve cats, a dip in the ocean, the kind of fear that forces a 29-year-old to grow up, a new beginning. “Toast,” I said.

“What?”

“I can say, with one hundred percent certainty, that I love toast and would be thrilled if toast appeared in front of me right now.”

“We’re getting divorced over toast? Just go have toast! Buy every type of bread in the whole world and toast it to charcoal for all I care! No one’s stopping you! Name something I can’t give you!”

“Horse cock.”

The man had many positive traits, but had always lacked a sense of humor. Failing to entertain him, I felt like an insolent child.

“Sorry, that was a dumb joke,” I said. “I am thinking about what I want, like in a serious, long-term way. I don’t have an answer that will make you happy or make our divorce feel less difficult. But, since we’ve separated, I’ve finally been able to think about...thinking.”

“Don’t break a nail thinking too hard,” he grumbled.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“For what?”

I’d lost whatever nerve I thought I had. Involuntarily, I put on a cutesy smile and stuck my chest out. “For selling the nice things from our home. It was too painful to hold onto old memories.”

He looked around. “It’s just stuff.”

I was still thinking of a rebuttal while I watched him drive away.

A group of women, all in head-to-toe pink, came by to pick through my yard sale. Maybe it was a sorority reunion or a book club. I felt a prick of jealousy.

One of the pink women ran her hand over my opal jewelry and called her friends over to marvel. Two years ago, I went through an opal phase: earrings, necklaces, ring, even a never worn tiara. People complimented how the gemstone radiated against my skin, and I soaked up the praise as though it applied, not merely to a rock, but to myself overall.

Then, the moment passed. I transported all of the opal things with the notion that I might return to them, but I never did.

“Great collection,” the handsy woman said. “Is there a discount if I purchase multiple?”

“No,” I snapped.

All of the pink women froze, looking startled and chastised.

“Someone already bought them,” I lied.

The women nodded. They thanked me as they left, not for my customer service, but because nice, pink women had to be gracious.

Watching the swath of pink walk away, I missed my pink toaster. Why did I sell it to some uncultured schoolgirl? I needed that toaster. After all, I was a Bergdorf’s girl. I was a toaster girlie. I was a toast gal. I was toast.

The antithesis of the powerless nobody was the active consumer. Failing to consume, I would wither away and die. Meanwhile, the college girl would thrive with my talismanic toaster granting her confidence, purpose, and, of course, toast.

While I didn’t grow up with money, I was raised to believe that hard work reaped financial rewards. Investing time and effort into my appearance, cultivating a passion for glamor and a personality around self-objectification, had earned me recognition and reward—to an extent. Though I knew little about my wants and needs when I got married and moved, I was propelled forward by the rush of having value to someone highly-valued. What was vanity if not ambition? And who was I without either?

By five, I was ready to pack up. I’d made ninety dollars, and each sale had triggered an emotional spiral. Bagging my items felt like an impossible task. I stood immobile with an empty plastic bag in hand when an older woman approached to peruse the tables. After fifteen minutes, she came over with a pair of opal studs and a pair of dangling opal earrings. “You have so many beautiful things,” she said.

I shrugged.

“I can’t decide between these two.” She held up the studs to one ear and the dangling earrings to the other.

“They both suit you,” I answered honestly.

“You’re sweet,” she said. “Or a good salesman.”

“Take them both,” I said.

“I shouldn’t,” she said. “Though, these are lovely. How much would it be if I got both?”

“Two for one sale.”

“Really? Are these real opal?”

“Yes, but I don’t wear them anymore. And they look radiant against your skin.”

“Then, I’ll take this sweater too,” the woman said, hastily picking up a cardigan. “And I will pay for it,” she added sternly. “Do you take Venmo?”

I handed her a piece of paper with a QR code. “Make your husband pay,” I said, half-joking.

She extended her hand to show me her diamond engagement ring and silver wedding band. “I’m actually widowed. These are just pretty things. And my new opal babies will be enjoyed by my eyes only. Though I can hardly see anything these days, so how silly is that!” She laughed. “I’m surprised we’ve never met. Are you new to town?”

“Kind of, but I’m about to leave,” I said. After saying it aloud, I realized it was true.

“Good for you,” she said.

“Thanks.”

“No, thank you,” she said, holding up her haul.

“Here, let me bag those for you.” I put down the plastic bag in my hand and gingerly folded the sweater inside an old tote bag, its brand name long worn off. I was about to bag the earrings when the woman stopped me.

“I’ll wear these out,” she said, holding up the dangling opals. She struggled to thread the earring through her lobe.

“Can I help?” I asked.

“Would you mind? I’m used to doing this in front of a mirror.”

She smiled while I put her earrings on, then thanked me again before leaving. Her earrings swayed as she walked. The gems toyed lovingly with the afternoon light.

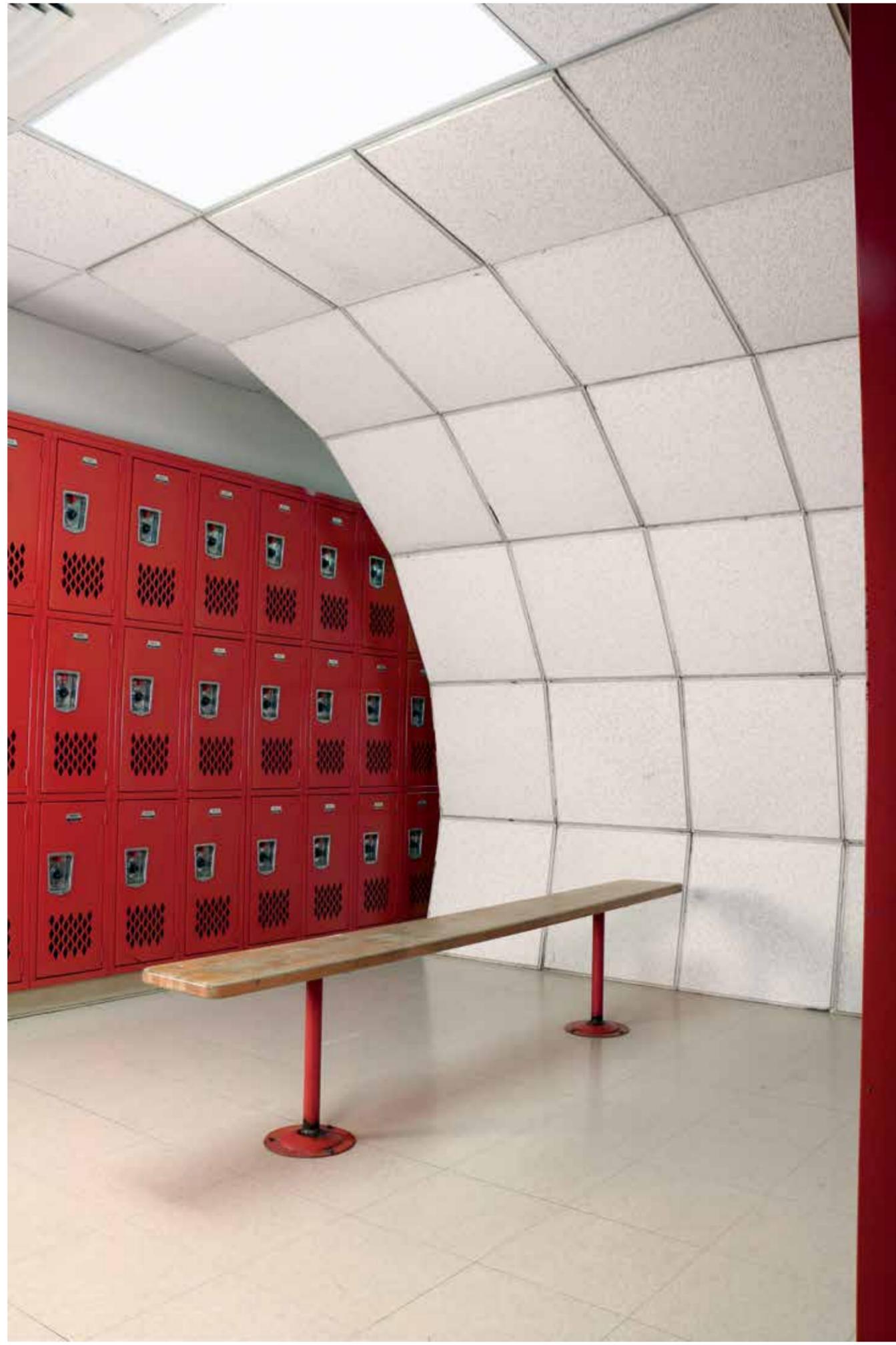
Suddenly, I realized I was still holding the opal studs. “Hey, you forgot these!” I shouted.

She didn’t turn.

I sprinted to catch up.

*-Jillian Elkin*





Previous Page  
*Crystal Scaffold*  
Above  
*Transpose*  
Opposite  
*Dropped*  
Michael Webster

### Was and Was Not

They had known each other for two decades, through the end of his first marriage and the whole of his turbulent second. They had never been romantically attracted to each other, or so he thought. They had travelled to Canada and Mexico with friends and sat in saunas in northern Minnesota and hot tubs in mid-priced hotels in Omaha, Tulsa, and Austin, but seeing Claire naked in those times and places did not spark arousal so much as appreciation.

Now, with him in her guest room bed, and she standing there with an open silk robe, telling him that she wanted, as she put it, “sex, straight and hard” was a surprise. He would have days, weeks, a lifetime to rewind what had led up to it, but in the present, he had to say something, and whatever it was, would alter their relationship. It was a temptation. He could take her in his arms, kiss her, proceed through the vocabulary of intimacies that would bring them to orgasm. They were adults and all that stood in the way was his consent.

It was an odd thought that for once the proverbial shoe was on the other foot. What was the basis for him to say no? Well, there was a girlfriend, half a continent away. She had not asked for exclusiveness and did not need to be told about what could be a one-time thing. He would know that he had been unfaithful even if she didn't.

I can't.

You mean, you won't.

That too. I have a girlfriend.

She doesn't need to know.

True enough, but I seriously doubt that you and I doing it would be one and done.

With that he got out of bed, gave her a kiss on the cheek, turned her around and gently walked her to the door. Closing the door, he went back to the bed, lay down and began to stroke himself, imagining what could have happened.

After he got up to wash himself in the bathroom and passing Claire's door, heard her crying. It took every bit of discipline he could muster to keep himself from going in to stop her tears. He could see two outcomes of that wanting to comfort her.

In one version, he would ask her forgiveness for his rejection, his stupidity, for his principles and then abandoning them, give her what she had asked for. It would be good or good enough. Make-up sex, the kind he had not had enough of with the first wife and plenty of with the second. It would suffice until one of both of them came to their senses.

In a variation of that, it would be a disappointment or worse. Too little, too late to be seen as anything more than capitulation to emotions. It would not seal their bond but plant seeds of regret.

The other outcome, he could foresee was a slap that he probably deserved. Anger substituted for tears, and again, regret that either had said anything. The twenty years of friendship at risk for having confessed to wanting to shift the dynamic and been rebuffed.

He returned to his room and an uneasy sleep. In the morning he apologized. She did the same. They agreed to not talk about what had not happened. In the afternoon he changed his ticket and caught a red eye home.

His girlfriend met him at the airport. When he kissed her, she seemed to hesitate. He thought he would ask her about that on the ride downtown but before he could, she had something she wanted to tell him.

This isn't working anymore. I'm done.

You're breaking up with me?

Yes. Don't argue. I've moved my stuff out of your apartment.

He felt he was a fool. Rightly so. What he had here was done and gone. He couldn't ask for a do over for what he hadn't done in LA. Though Claire might sympathize with the irony of his situation, she would not want to let herself be vulnerable again.

His situation? It could be summed up by what the poet Tadjek said, “The first step is fatal and after that you're on your own.”

*-Loren Niemi*

**making change**

and oft the only change  
one's found lays flat,  
sulking in the road,  
worn so that one  
inquiring of its age  
sees only the scoured  
traces of hands passing  
along one to the next  
*counting counting,*  
like chaplets for a priest  
estimating sins repayment.

*-Tara Joyce*



*Self-Portrait with Cat*  
Krystof Novotny

## Morning Coffee

Although I have been near death several times, I have not yet died. Or if I have, some malevolence has concealed the fact from me. It would simplify my life considerably if I had not survived, but what can you do? Here I am, after road crashes, dark alleys, and a small number of significant but still minor medical degradations, an old man growing older in a rented room. Well, rooms: it's not a bad place I live in, speaking of the physical domicile. The spiritual domicile may be another matter. I am tired of life, though not tired enough to take positive action and accelerate my inevitable dispersal into oblivion. The problem is twofold: I am still curious about what will happen next in the modest territory of my social realm, and sometimes, damn it, I taste happiness.

It's a burden to be reasonable and open. You keep on living, poor and scrounging for the money to make rent and buy food, or not poor and not scrounging, and then you find yourself sitting bored in front of the widescreen, with your back aching because you slouch. Or both: I have friends who are poor and live for the endless parade of yawping YouTube snippets and not much else. It's not the primordial yawp that Whitman sang of, but they've never heard of rambunctious Whitman, have they? I've sat with them now and then and watched the braying young men showing off their calculated foolishness for the phone cams. Waste of time, and it gave me a sore back. Tell you what: I find more reason to live in this ritual of my morning coffee than in all the hold-my-beer videos the mighty Internet can offer these days. Maybe it's a bit twee, but it's little things like that which I blame for my continued decision to live on. That, and ancient Stella, who will share this coffee with me soon.

Stella is older than I am, and not a bit ashamed of her gray hair and drooping cheeks. I can see her from my kitchen window now, trudging, a little stooped, across the narrow street between our buildings. I start the fire under the big mocha pot and go to the front door to wait for her distinctive tap. She never uses the doorbell, or at least she hasn't since someone rang while she was visiting and she declared it to be an obnoxious clang. And the tap helps when I would otherwise suspect that my visitor might be one of those tedious sorts selling vacuum cleaners, uplifting magazines, or some off-brand of religion. Of course we get them all in this town. When I hear the tap, I know that it's only thank god Stella coming to visit and mooch a brew. By the time I get to the door, she's there, *tap-tap, tap-tap*. I count off a few seconds so as not to startle her, and open up. "Hey, Georgie, what took you? I saw you peeking out that goddamn window of yours. Where's my coffee?" And she trudges in, ignores my offer of a supportive elbow, and sits in her favored chair at the kitchen table. I've got a real dining table, made of wood, in the other room, but we always have our coffee at the chrome and Formica table in the kitchen. "I like the light here," she always says. "We'll all be in the dark forever soon enough. And your tabletop is green, and that's my color."

"If it's your color, how come you never wear it?"

"It's not a color for an old broad like me. But I like it. It soothes the eyes. Where's my coffee?"

The burble of the pot answers her, and she smiles. "You're running late, Georgie. But I forgive you."

There is a certain ritual to the pour: first her cup of course, then mine, then the silent offering of sugar and cream, to which she nods her head. Next in order is the pressing down of the toaster lever, after which I sit down and we raise our coffee mugs to each other and take the first sips. And after that, Stella raises the Topic of the Day, to be discussed with

measured vehemence between sips of coffee and crunches of toast, as a reminder that we participate in the world even at our age, and also, as she often points out, to help keep our minds sharp, "So that we can take in all we'll be missing once we're boxed up and dissolved." Stella is, of course, a fervent atheist. But today she says, "Listen Georgie, we got to talk...." She lets the sentence drift away but fixes her eye on mine.

"What is it?" I say. "It sounds like I'm in trouble. No one's looked at me like that since my mother died."

"I'm not your mother; you'd be a better man if I had been. But you're good enough. Georgie, I want to move in here with you. I'm getting too old to live alone, and you'll be getting there soon yourself. Too much cleaning, too little company. You can afford that cleaning lady, but I can't. And anyway I'm tired of four walls for company. What do you say?" She indulges in a watchful pause then goes on: "I'll pay some rent, even. We can keep each other company, and call the coroner on each other when we croak. No hanky-panky, of course, just friends. Like we are now but a little more so. I know you have that extra bedroom that's just full of junk since Linda died. Whaddaya say?" Another pause. "Move that old junk out, and move some new old junk in, by which I mean me. I'm a tired old lady, Georgie, but I can keep you entertained. Don't I already? Right?"

Of course she's right, but the proposition was unexpected. The most reasonable thing to do at that point is to stare into my coffee mug and try to think about it. Stella leans back in her chair, holding her own coffee mug in both hands. She has mentioned Linda, my wife, dead now four years. The extra bedroom had been her hidey-hole, where she would go to read or watch her little TV, or try her hand at her various craft projects that never went anywhere, or in more recent times stare at her phone screen, which is what she was doing when she keeled over dead of a stroke. I respected her need for solitude, so I didn't even know she was gone for three or four hours. I've barely gone into the room since, not that it was a shrine or anything, we didn't have that perfect a relationship, but simply that it wasn't my room. I'd felt uncomfortable filling it with boxes of Linda's stuff that I didn't know what to do with. But her stuff doesn't mean anything to me; it was specifically and intentionally not mine, a way, Linda once said, of declaring her independent personhood. Stella knows all this; she was as much Linda's friend as mine.

I look up at Stella. "My god, we used to be young once, didn't we?"

Stella laughs: "Yeah, well, that's all over with. We're remnants, Georgie. Listen, like I said, I don't want your body, you don't want mine. But we shouldn't be alone at our age. Let's take care of each other. We'll save money too. But mostly I think we'll save our sanity. Whaddaya say? It's a go. Right?"

"Ah, I don't know, Stella. I mean, we've got our habits, we might end up stepping on each other's emotional toes, don't you think?"

"Emotional toes', that's a good one! But come on, Georgie, we're grownups, or we ought to be at our age. Look at everything we've adjusted to so far! You lost Lindy, I lost Hal, the things my kids went through, and no, I can't live with either of them, there'd be broken emotional toes all over the place. But we understand each other, Georgie, you and me. This morning coffee routine, come on: we were just getting ready to shack up. Without, as I said, hanky-panky. Hey, and I bet I can cook better than you can."

"I won't dispute that. I've had dinner at your place."

“Right! And I’ve had it here. You’re not bad, Georgie, but I ran a little café for ten years, this was before we knew each other, I know my way around a goddamn stove, don’t I? My god, that was long ago...!” She sips her coffee and adds, “Hey, wasn’t I the one that taught you to make good brew?”

I nod assent. Of course she goes on, but I’m used to her loquacity: “And besides, I’ve got arthritis in my back now, and something’s funny with my right hip. I can’t take care of my place right any more. All that stooping down and pushing vacuum cleaners and all that. And we both need company. How come you never had any kids?”

“We just—we just, well, I don’t know. We talked it over and decided not to. It worked out.”

She looks at me a little cross-eyed, a trick she pulls to show she’s skeptical. “Ah, well, Georgie, you never know with kids. Mine survived growing up somehow, but we’re not close. And I know I can be hard to take. But you’re used to me, see? And...you’re lonely, I can tell. Otherwise you wouldn’t put up with me every morning. We’re good friends now, Georgie, so how about it? We can be each other’s surrogate teddy bears. Without the touching. No complications, just company. Enough hoarding boxes of someone else’s memories. She’s gone. Hal’s gone. But you and me, we’re not gone yet. I know that sounds cold, but it’s not as cold as the grave, right? So whaddaya say?”

I think I’ve known all through this conversation that I would accept. Why not? Stella’s got good sense, she even ran a business for thirty years, some kind of small specialty food distributing company I think, it doesn’t matter, and she sold it off so she isn’t entirely dependent on Social Security. I suspect that, despite her complaints of poverty, she’s better off than I am, though that wouldn’t take much. I look her in the eye and say, “Okay. You’ve got me over a barrel. I don’t know how to say No to your proposition.”

“Then say Yes. Which you just did. Okay!” She beams a smile at me over her coffee mug and raises it in a toast. I raise mine as well. We both sip, and put the cups down simultaneously. “And don’t worry,” she says. “I won’t be pushy. That room of Linda’s, I’ll change the pictures on the wall, maybe, but I won’t forget that this is your home and I’m a paying guest, okay? And by the way, I already cleared this with Jerry, did you know he owns my building too? He’s happy as a pig in shit, like my great-grandpa used to say, he was a farmer, ‘cause now he can rent out my place for more than I’ve been paying him. I knew he would be. So we just add me to the lease, and life goes on. Right?”

I nod: “I guess so. Life goes on. Right!”

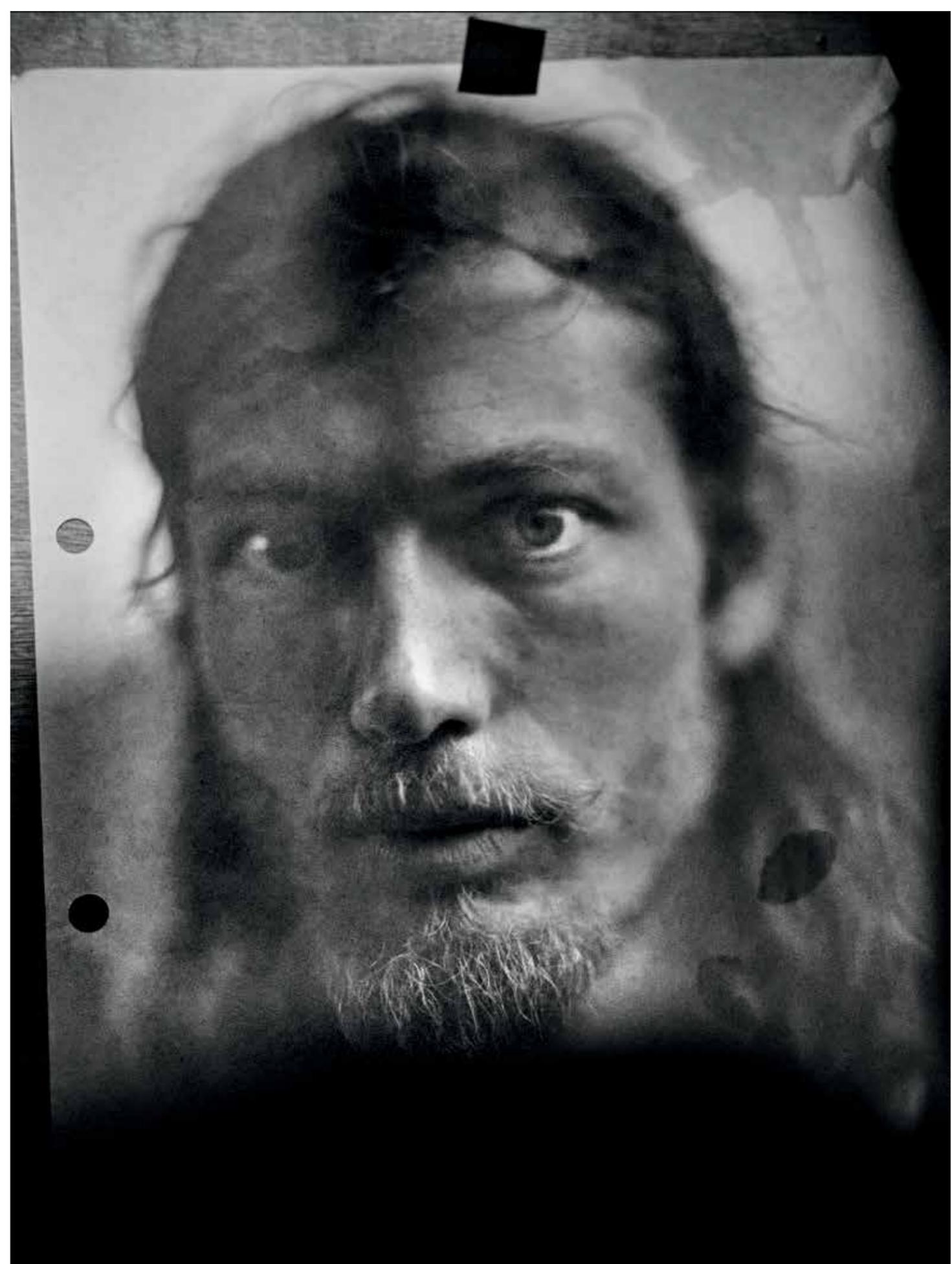
“Until it doesn’t,” she adds. “But we’ll burn that bridge when we get to it. How old was your ma when she died?”

The question surprises me, but I think back and answer: “Ninety-three. And my dad was eighty-nine.”

“Ha! Both my folks lived to ninety-five. They were born the same month, same year, died likewise, clear-headed but a little frail in the legs and back, like me. So we’ve got some time, you and me. Let’s not waste it. I hear it’s in short supply.” She waves her coffee mug: “And how about a second cup over here? I know that big old pot’s not empty yet.” She leans forward and reaches her mug to me so I can pour. “That’s more like it,” she says. “Now, let’s get on with the day.”

*-Richard Risemberg*

*Artur. Poland. Wooden Ship Builder  
Jeremy Starn*



### How to Find Love

Don't attempt to locate it.  
Betray the very notion it exists.  
Go about the business of life:  
The mundane, the petty, the drudge.  
Let boredom be your best friend.  
Allow nonchalance to visit often.  
Hoist yourself above the clouds,  
But never, ever, gaze down.  
Softly whisper the word *desire*,  
Yet refuse to pronounce it aloud.  
Come to your senses,  
Only when the undertaker  
Offers you a blank contract  
You're not prepared to sign.  
Then, perhaps, you'll find  
What you've been searching for.

-Bart Edelman



*The Wheel*  
Erin Wilson

## How I Became Myehudi

Assimilation. Isn't that what most Jews fear? We'll get diluted by the dominant culture and disappear? Then, the mumbo-jumbo of Christianity becomes the *logical* way of thinking: you were born a sinner, but Jesus died for you, so as long as you accept 'Him' as your savior, you're absolved. You can sin as much as you want.

How does it differ from our Jewish way of thinking? I'll get to that.

I spent the early years of my life in Skokie, Illinois, a town most American Jews have heard about. After World War II, Jews were allowed to buy property there because there were no restrictive covenants. Housing was relatively inexpensive. I believe my parents paid under \$10,000 for their home.

Looking back, judging by who put out Christmas decorations, probably over half of households in Skokie were Jewish. Our next door neighbors were Lutheran, but on the other side of them were more Jews. Across the street there was a Catholic family. There were no black families in Skokie back then.

It was important to my parents that we children understood that we were Jews. My parents had been raised in Conservative households which kept kosher, but they decided to be Reform. We went to Sunday school, where we learned some of the Old Testament stories, and we observed the High Holy days. However, there was never much discussion in our home of what Jews believed.

I was never proselytized to until I was a teenager. Then, it was a friend's mother, who thought she could convert me.

I don't think *goyem* realize that if you're raised in a tradition that makes sense, you're not going to fall for an idea that has too many holes in it. We lived in a Christian culture. That was the reality. Heaven? Well, of course we'd heard of it. How can you grow up in America and not learn about heaven or hell, even though it's not part of your tradition?

In any case, I was a teenager during the civil rights movement and the Viet Nam war, and I was starting to ask questions.

One day, in high school, I was in the school library, and I picked up an American Heritage magazine. It was a hard cover magazine, much like the Smithsonian. I read a story about the Yoruba of Nigeria, and, in current trope, I became *woke*.

I had been taught that Africans had no culture or religion, and that the white Europeans, now Americans, did them a good deed by *civilizing* them. I realized not everything learned was *real*. I was also taught, by my family, that Israel was an uninhabited desert until the Jews came and made it bloom.

Thinking about college, I was interested in African studies. My parents told me that was out of the question. If they were going to pay for college, I would have to major in education. The goal would be to get a 'Mrs.'

I didn't go to college. I learned to groom dogs, just as horrifying. A Jewish girl working with dogs?

I left home and managed to support myself... by grooming dogs. I married my boyfriend (*goyem*), and after a few years realized that we were not on the same page. We got divorced. When I was about to turn 30, I decided to go on a camping safari in Tanzania.

Tanzania, into the early 1980's, had a 90% literacy rate, but no infrastructure. I That

made me curious and changed my life.

Being an American, I wanted to *help* the Africans. I took CLEP exams and got two years of college credit, and decided to major in anthropology (which also upset my father, even though I was paying for my own schooling), concentrating in Africa area and environmental studies. I would go back to Africa and *help* Africans develop their communities.

I wanted to get a taste of what Peace Corps might be like, and to improve my KiSwahili. I signed up to volunteer with Operation Crossroads Africa, Inc., which was a forerunner to Peace Corps. That group started sending American college students to a dozen African countries in 1958. It was mostly college students, but anyone who could pay the registration fees and write an essay about why they wanted to volunteer could go. This was in 1987.

Volunteering is such an American idea.

It so happened that of the eight of us in our group, two others were also Jews. We were sent to Kenya. A few of us were older, with 'careers'. I was one of the older ones.

What we learned on that trip was that virtually every educated Kenyan identified as Christian or Moslem. Only uneducated people were animist, or so we were told. We met a lot of Maasai on that trip. The Maasai believe in one God, and for the most part, were not easily converted. The European missionaries enticed the Africans not just with stuff, but with *education*. That's how they do it: get them while they're young. Teach them songs. Give them sweets. The Africans might or might not have believed in an afterlife, but they definitely did after being inculcated by Christians.

The District Commissioner (local 'mayor' type of person) brought our group of volunteers to the AIC Girls Primary Boarding School. It was in Kajiado, south of Nairobi. The school was sponsored by the African Inland Church, a Protestant group from Scotland. Well-off African families of all religions sent their daughters because the quality of education was considered better than most public primary schools. All the teachers were at least high school graduates. Some had more education. This school was nothing fancy, but you don't need fancy. Girls had to haul water in the morning before classes started.

The headmistress was a well-educated Maasai woman, and it was decided that we'd make bricks for a new class building.

Sand, small stones, and frames were ordered, and a community development worker, a young African guy, showed us how to mix the materials and pour the goop into frames. We learned later that the bricks should have been *cured* in a pool of water for several days, but none of us had ever done this and had no idea what we were doing. Also, there was a drought, and the headmistress trucked water into the school from a well on her farm.

This was hard physical work. Bricks are heavy. We did this for about six hours a day.

I quickly realized that the quality of our bricks was so bad, crumbling easily because they were not cured properly, we probably would never have enough for even a latrine. I expressed my dismay to the headmistress, but she told me, "That isn't important. What's important is that the girls see you working."

We were told that if teachers asked us to teach, we should leave our brickmaking and teach the class. The headmistress thought it would be a good idea for the girls to get used to listening to our American accents.

A teacher approached me with her lesson after we had been there about a week, and

asked me to teach. She handed me her book. Her lesson was: 'How we know Jesus Christ is with us every day in our lives'.

Again, this was not a public school, but it wouldn't have mattered. How many of us went to public schools in the USA and learned Christmas songs, possibly even hymns and the Lord's Prayer? But it was a shock.

I told the teacher, "I'm sorry. I can't teach this. Jesus Christ is *not* with me every day in my life. I'm a Jew."

Looking very surprised, she asked me, "Don't you believe in Jesus?"

"Well, we don't doubt he existed, but we believe we're all God's children." Other teachers gathered around us. "We don't believe in virgin birth. We're the chosen people," I added.

"What do you believe?" the teacher asked.

"Well, we don't really have a concept of Hell," I said.

"We don't have a concept of Heaven, either," one of the other Jewish girls added.

"So, what happens to you when you die?" The teacher asked us.

"You're dead," we told her, in unison. Rather funny.

She gasped, and asked, "So what causes you to be good?"

I had to think. "You're responsibility to your community and integrity," I responded. My Jewish companion nodded. The teachers were all listening to this conversation.

"We didn't come here to tell you what to believe. That's your business. We came to learn how you lived and to help do what you needed done, because we have the time," I explained.

We continued to make bricks. The word got out, and people from the community started visiting and asking questions. They called us *Unusual Visitors*. Not only were we the first white people they had ever met who weren't missionaries, but we were the first white people they had ever seen do physical labor.

Several people explained to us that we Jews were called *Wayehudi* in Swahili. I was Mychudi: a single Jew.

We were constantly asked how we could be happy without being saved. It seemed to disturb a lot of people that we didn't believe that we were going to rot in hell. We explained that our parents never taught us that. I added that we didn't know what happened after we died. That was up to God. We were just required to respect other people and not to harm them. We told them that we wondered how they believed they'd be forgiven by Jesus if they did things they knew were wrong. That usually stopped conversation of religion.

We learned that most of the people we interacted with were Kikuyu, who were agrarians from the north. As they 'got fruitful and multiplied', they spread south into Maasai land, which was where we were. We interacted with the Maasai often, but they generally didn't send their children to European style schools unless they were handicapped, because they needed the children for labor. However, many were well educated and spoke with us in both English and KiSwahili.

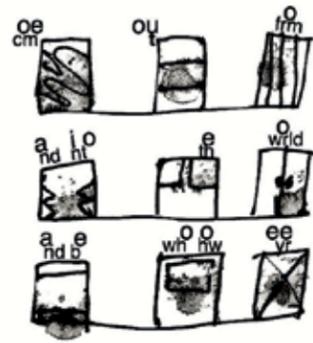
What I've learned is that people raised in diversity are curious and not judgmental. It's those who segregate themselves who fear differences.

As I matured and traveled more, I've often been asked what my religion is. I am often proselytized to. I realized that the people approaching us trying to save us thought they were doing us a good deed, but if they persisted, I'd ask them why they were so concerned about my future and not doing what's right in the first place.

These days, I feel we are more subject to the pretzel logic of a cult. They really believe that Jesus will love them more if they control what we do.

I guess I never really got assimilated. I joined Peace Corps and worked as an urban planner in Malawi. I've returned to Africa several times since then. I am always asked my religion. People know Jews. There have been Jews in Africa at least since the late 1800's. Religious? Who is to judge? I'm sure they lived their truth. They were Wayehudi. Isn't that what's important?

-Robyn Michaels



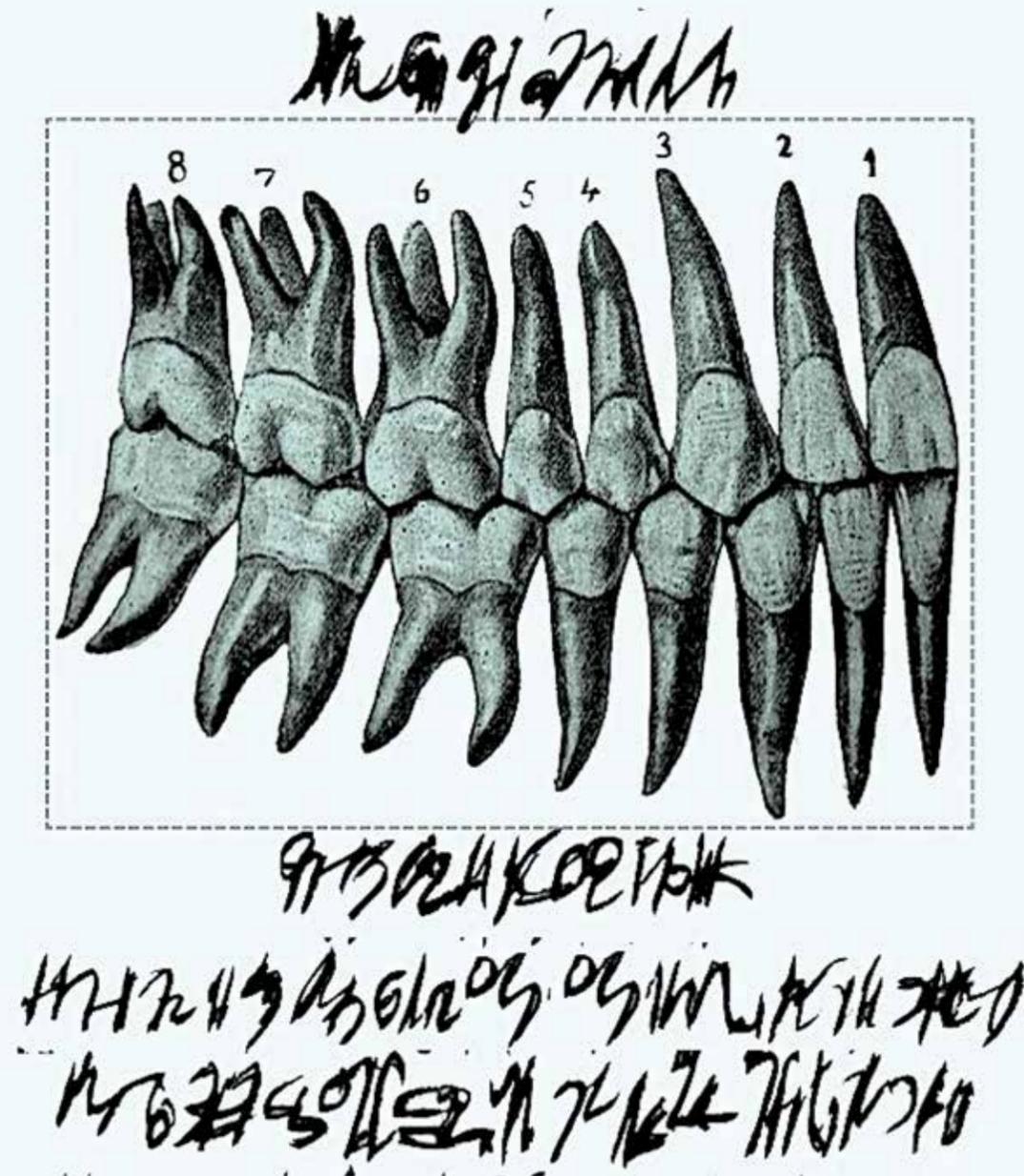
A perfect-for-every-occasion set of shadows lie  
 out of sight but nesting like  
 lizards  
 here in my pocket  
 mutable and fluid forms to take on  
 every mood and temperament  
 I can eye blink flip them across the hills and into  
 corners onto the walkway or slap on  
 your bedroom wall  
 dark shapes to highlight a something -you-  
 know reminder  
 shiver bringers  
 hand clammy  
 track stop  
 it's how I foster illumination

**Good Morning**

I ask your mother to sit  
in my seat, look out  
my window at the Japanese  
Maple, the grief of winter  
limbs. Hung with night  
drops of rain, branches  
drink from a pool of sun  
-- spark stars of white,  
yellow, pink and blue,  
as if light ignites creation.

Do you see it? I need  
to be sure. And Mom –  
do not think me foolish  
that I call her my doe –  
says, *yes*. And that is  
how we came to marry,  
how I like to think our  
story ends, how I sleep.

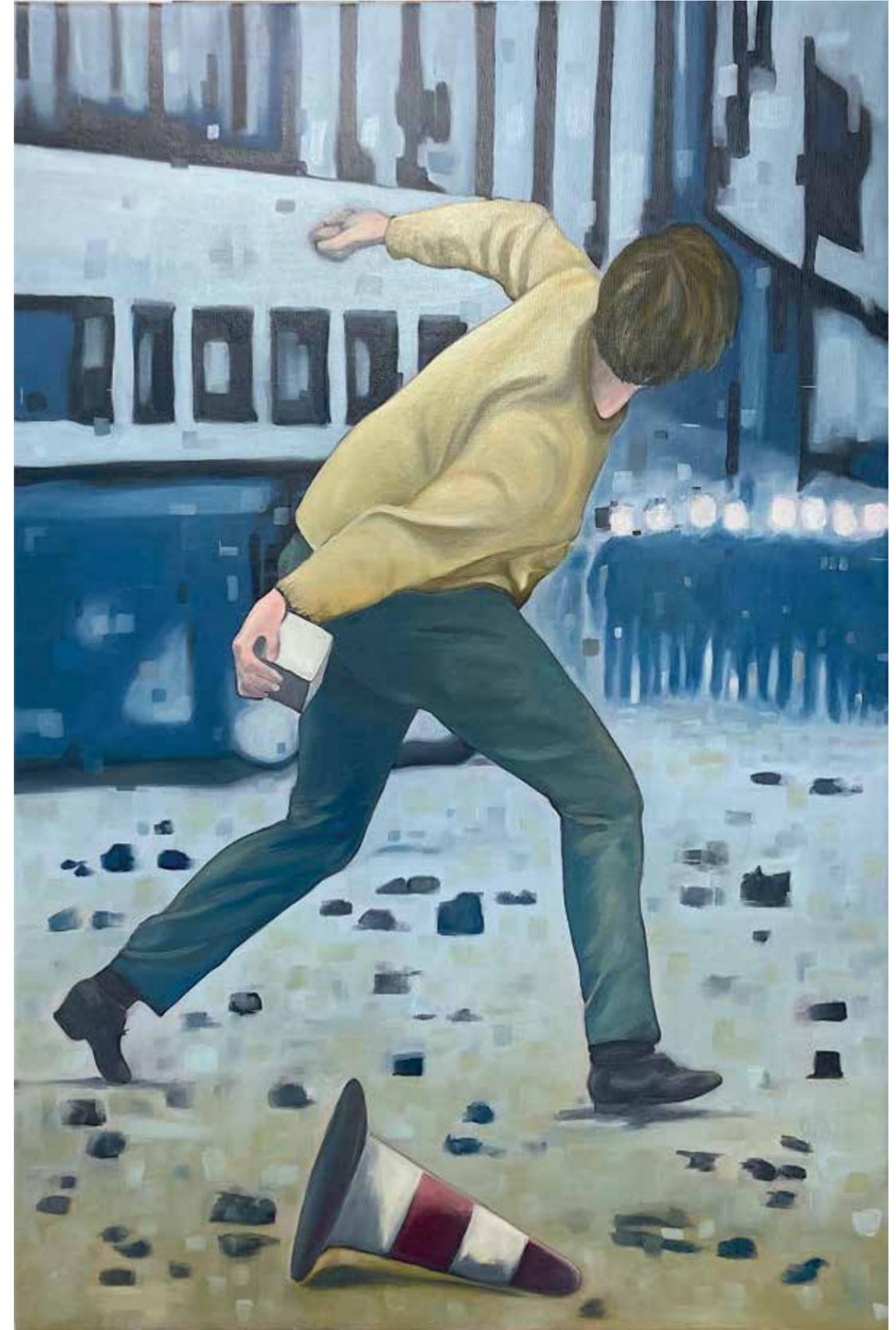
*-Theodore Eisenberg*



### Breakfast at Aberdeen Village

So quickly taken from someone else's shelf—  
first the eggs, some bread and cheese—mixing.  
It's never easy watching an omelet being made, and  
since I prefer a simple scramble, the whole process is  
wasted on me. Yet I am served—should be grateful for the  
bounty—push back my starving and grow fat from the attention,  
basking in the aroma of gifts undeserved. Yet the salty taste of your  
neck is my true hunger's crave and the only food that comforts me.  
I'll dream a little as I take each bite—try to act civilized as I  
get lost in the possibilities of simply taking your hand  
and leading you back to our room.

*-Pasquale Trozzolo*



*Sous la plage les pavés*  
Walter Dermul

### Thought Police: Publish at Your Peril

‘Poetry makes nothing happen – would that this were true of Religion’

Peter Porter, *Afterburner*, 2004

Long before Alan Bennett performed his wickedly irreverent parody of a sermon in *Beyond the Fringe* (1960), Jonathan Swift delivered his spoof ‘Meditation on a Broomstick’ (1701). He was presumably provoked into doing so by having to read pious platitudes to the household of his patron, William Temple. The meditation starts as comparatively gentle satire and was skilful enough to make its listeners wonder whether it was real.

By the time he came to publish *Gulliver’s Travels* in 1726, however, Swift could be utterly scathing. It is said that an eighteenth-century bishop read what he assumed was a book of exotic travels and declared that he didn’t believe a word of it. Book II about Lilliput contains the ludicrous sectarian feud between the Big-Endians and Little-Endians, those who are committed to approach their boiled eggs in different ways. But the satire also contains one of the more lethal indictments of colonialism ever printed. It is worth quoting the extract in full as it comes at the end of the book after Lemuel Gulliver’s return to England:

*A crew of pirates are driven by a storm they know not whither; at length a boy discovers land from the topmast; they go on shore to rob and plunder; they see a harmless people, are entertained with kindness; they give the country a new name; they take formal possession of it for their king; they set up a rotten plank or stone for a memorial; they murder two or three dozen natives; bring away a couple more by force for a sample; return home and get their pardon.*

*Here commences a new dominion acquired with a title by divine right. Ships are sent with the first opportunity; the natives driven out or destroyed; their princes tortured to discover their gold; a free licence given to all acts of inhumanity and lust, the earth reeking with the blood of its inhabitants; and this execrable crew of butchers, employed in so pious an expedition, is a modern colony, sent to convert and civilize an idolatrous and barbarous people!*

In this context of such savage indignation, one thinks of the lands now known as the United States of America and it is also worth remembering that this condemnation was written in the Georgian era by the Reverend Jonathan Swift, later Dean of St Paul’s, at a time when European empires were vying for territories and supremacy in what they saw as ‘the New World’. Among those Europeans were British, French, Spanish, Portuguese and Dutch. One also remembers the fanatical orthodoxies and barbaric reprisals promoted in the name of various sects in Christendom. And then, for just one example, there is the inquisitorial suppression of Galileo and his scientific observations by the Catholic Church under Pope Urban V.

As George Orwell said in his unpublished preface to *Animal Farm* (1945):

‘If liberty means anything at all it means the right to tell people what they do not want to hear.’

Significantly, it is said that Orwell’s Nineteen Eighty-Four has been the most banned book in the world in various regions, such as the USSR. *Animal Farm* has also been widely banned. It has provoked a ban in the UAE because it contains talking pigs and in Cuba and North Korea for its depiction of Communism. For me, it is one of the best satires on human nature, hierarchies, propaganda and corruption ever written.

In its scorn and trenchant condemnations, satire aims to ridicule, correct and reform, even if it remains powerless to instigate and effect change directly. Satire has its enemies and it can make even more. A case in point in our own time is what has come to be known as the Salman Rushdie affair which is well documented elsewhere. (See Wikipedia, for example: Satanic Verses Controversy.) Briefly, in 1988, he published his fourth novel, *The Satanic Verses* and severe repercussions and reprisals followed. The fiction was regarded by some as blasphemous in its portrayal of Islam and its prophet Mohammed. In February of the following year 1989, the Ayatollah Khomeini of Iran pronounced a fatwa, calling for the deaths of Rushdie and his publishers. Copies of the book were burned in Bolton and Bradford, bookshops were bombed and, under police protection, Rushdie went into hiding and lived in numerous places under an assumed name (Joseph Anton) over the following years.

The fatwa had other deadly consequences too. For instance, the novel’s Japanese translator was assassinated in 1991. In Pakistan, where Rushdie had been celebrated for his third novel *Shame*, there were riots where six people were killed. And much more. To some commentators, it seemed that freedom of speech and of the written word was compromised by the demand that the tenets of Islam should never be ridiculed, demeaned or questioned or else attacks would be sanctioned. Islamic sharia law was invoked to punish those in another jurisdiction and for some the whole event represented a clash of cultures between libertarian West and fundamentalist Islam. One wonders who and how many of those who condemned the novel so vehemently and violently had read the Viking Penguin book first and in which languages.

The controversy and conflicts prompted by reactions to *The Satanic Verses* have continued in various forms and have had echoes elsewhere. One remembers the murders of the staff of the satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris in 2015 for publishing cartoons of the prophet Mohammed. One questions why the authorities of the theocracy feel such a strong need to protect their religion from question, lampoon, cartoon, jokes and satire and to such a violent extent. But clearly fundamentalists are not liberal moderates and the very word Islam means submission. Think only this. Believe or die. Intimidation, death-threats and mass-murder can be powerful weapons in controlling freedoms of thought and action, as tyrants and totalitarian rulers are well aware from Hitler and Stalin to Mao Tse-tung and Putin. The same applies to vengeful theocracies. As Rushdie has said,

*‘The moment you say that any idea system is sacred, whether it’s a religious belief system or a secular ideology, the moment you declare a set of ideas to be immune from criticism, satire, derision, or contempt, freedom of thought becomes impossible.’*

Most recently, as readers will remember, Sir Salman Rushdie was about to speak on freedom of expression in a literary festival in Chautauqua, New York, 12 August 2022. Specifically, it was to focus on ‘the United States as asylum for writers and other artists in exile and as a home for freedom of creative expression.’ He was attacked by a fanatic and survived multiple stab-wounds, although he is now blinded in one eye. The fatwa declared against him all those years ago and which cannot be revoked has shaped his life and his writing. As Rushdie says, ‘What is freedom of expression? Without the freedom to offend, it ceases to exist’ and ‘From the beginning men used God to justify the unjustifiable.’

According to Rushdie, ‘A book is not completed till it’s read’ and, to be candid, I tried to read *The Satanic Verses* when it first came out and found it very hard going then. Recently, I have tried again to read a first edition with yellowing pages but it still defeats me by about Chapter 2. Did the Ayatollah persist in reading it all the way through in Farsi, French or whatever? *Animal Farm*, on the other hand, remains one of my favourite books since I first read it at the age of

about ten. Unaware of its close critique of Russian Communism, I thought then that the fable was about human nature, hypocrisy, power and control, and I linked it to the boys' boarding school where I first read it and where we sang 'Beasts of England' defiantly in the dormitory to the specified tune of 'Clementine'.

It has remained with me ever since as an allegory of power at work. Under the exploitative Animalist/Communist regime depicted in Orwell's fable, religion and its false promises are feebly embodied in Moses the Raven in his black cassock of feathers who speaks glowingly of the Sugarcandy mountain where all hunger and oppression are to be no more. But genuinely sinister are the doctrinaire and self-serving pigs with their ferocious attack dogs as enforcers. I hope that reading the satire has helped me to be aware and beware of belligerent ideologies, bogus orthodoxies and dogmatic religions whose warriors, crusaders, zealots, fanatics and representatives claim to have god, gods, might, right or infallibility on their fiercely repressive and murderous side.

It all reminds me of Voltaire's much-quoted remark:

*'Anyone who has the power to make you believe absurdities has the power to make you commit injustices.'*

A fiction may seem true to life but fictions masquerading as eternal truths can be far more dangerous.

*-Duncan Forbes*

*Broken Heart*  
Yuliia Khovbosha



## National Defense

In one person's opinion  
four military choppers  
flying in close formation  
over rooftops in a residential area  
indicate the increasing  
militarization of peaceful everyday life.

A neighbor opines that  
they're only local kids  
getting to fly an hour  
on alternate weekends  
in the National Guard  
doing their best not to bump into one another.

*-George Ryan*



*Empty Arms.*  
Dan Gray

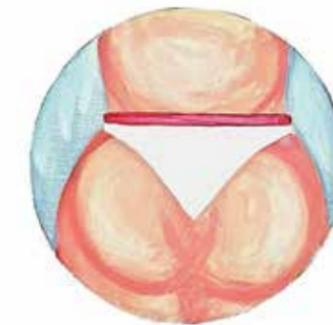
## White Whale

You come at the king, you best not miss.

—Omar, *The Wire*

I get the trend. Take a bad guy and give him a backstory that tenderizes the madness. Won't work on me. I wasn't mistreated by my mother. Born hated. Nor exiled. Couldn't care less they were hunting my kind and cutting them up. No, I break boats because it makes me happy, and happier still when the captain barking at his harpooners is a monomaniac. *White whale, pale cachalot...* something about me drives people so crazy they can't help but think I mean more than my body. Wrong again. That incident with the Pequod meant nothing but what happened. I gave them two days to reconsider, punched them up good, splintered some, sent my jaw through a bilge and set my teeth six inches from the head of the one I made one-legged long ago. Instead, they kept coming, and when you press a gangster you get why he's so called, but it's always too late to matter. Dealing with these pea-brained sailors, it's solid to remember humans are too dumb to take a hint: the only way they learn respect is by being devastated. When that third day dawned and I breached to screaming, saw they still thought they could kill me, a black joy diffused through my oils and my colossal heart darkened with destructive love. I pointed my head at the hull of the big one, took a rip of morning air through my blowhole and dove.

-Johnny Cate



*Beauty mirror observation series*  
Emma Griffiths

## Body

There are sad bodies. There are crying bodies. There are desperate bodies, hungry bodies, lonely bodies. There are bodies with mute fingers. Bodies with dead hair. Is the hair still growing on the heads of these bodies? No one to measure the hair on these bodies. Bodies like dandelions pushing. Bodies waiting for dandelions to be pushing. Bamboo will grow through these/those bodies. There are bodies waiting for bamboo. Limp limp weary bodies. Sick bodies. Dead bodies somewhat living. Living bodies somewhat dead. Bodies whose mouths have slid off. Bodies whose sex parts have lost their motors. Out of battery bodies. Bodies in need. Needful bodies. Bodies that groan. Bodies that only remember groans, last year's groans, once groans, groans overgrown with more girth of body. Please bodies. Penitent bodies. Bodies willing to wager anything. Bodies willing to deal anything. Bodies eager to sell everything. Bodies with nothing left to sell. Bodies without spirits. Chalk-line bodies. Please, stay off the grass bodies. This skin, this bone, this brash body. This silent in the dark body. This screaming at the black hood body. This cut body. This bulk body. This body that can alter nothing. This being body. This almost gone body. Body body body. This body alone. This is a sad sad body. This is a crying body. This is a desperate hungry body. A lonely body. A body with mute fingers. My body has dead hair. Is my hair still growing? No one to measure the hair on my head body. My body pushing body. My body waiting body. My body lying upon bamboo body. My somewhat living body, somewhat dead body. Where is my mouth body? Where is my sex body? Why not my motor body? Dead batteries. Damn. Damn this body. My body in need of body. My body groan-groaning body. It groans this groan body. It groans last year's groan. It groans remembrance of a groan. It grows more girth. It is my please body. It is my penitent body. It is my willing to wager anything body, deal anything body, eager to sell everything body, but with nothing left to sell. Where is my spirit? Not in this chalk-line body. Please, keep this body off the grass. I am this skin body, this bone body, this brash body. I am this crying body, this desperate body, this hungry body. I am this lonely body. My body is a pushing body. It is a pushing [verb]. It is a pushing [noun]. It is pushing at you. It is pushing at the stars. It is pushing at the dark hood, at the cutting and the selling and the giving and the horizon. It is pushing for resistance. It is pushing for resistance. Anything. Anything at all. Will anything at all resist this body?

*-Erin Wilson*



*The Way*  
Erin Wilson

## To the Westminster College Student Who Called Me a Trifling White-Ass Motherfucker

I'll get to you in a minute, but first some context. The day before we met, I'd been talking to George Clark, who had just bought a new car and was saying he'd asked the salesman what safety features are included, and the salesman said, "Well, in the event of a front-end collision, it used to be that the hood would fly off and go through the windshield and decapitate everyone in the car, but they re-engineered it, and now it just flips over the roof," and George says, "Oh, okay," though I can tell from the way he's telling me the story that, as he listened to the salesman's description of the worst horror to befall anyone while at the same time imagining the entire Clark family scrambling around and looking for their severed noggins and finding them but quite possibly putting the wrong ones on the wrong necks since they'd lack eyes to find the right ones and have to rely on sense of touch alone, for "everything that lives," said another George, this one being George Santayana, "is tragic in its fate, comic in its existence, and lyric in its ideal essence." Ergo the tragedy of the imagined wreck, the comedy of the aftermath, and the lyric eulogizing of the Clarks by George, for example, presuming he survives, or one of the rest of us if he doesn't. Providing nobody else talks us out of it, because somebody's always got a better idea: when Sequoyah invented an alphabet for the Cherokee, jealous tribesmen burned his cabin and all his notes with it. Also, three members of U2 are devout Christians who belong to a Dublin fellowship called Shalom, but just before they release their second album, another member of Shalom says he had a vision in which God revealed to him that

the group should disband. So Sequoyah invents a better alphabet—sometimes when you lose work and have to rewrite it, it's better, though nobody I know'd put a match to the original just for that opportunity—and U2 goes on to *really* become U2. Both the Native American sage and the Dublin lads were pretty good at talking to themselves, I'm thinking, as was, say, on the evil side of things, Ahab, who said "Talk

not to me of blasphemy, man; I'd strike the sun if it insulted me" or, on the prettier, artier side, Henry James, who, after he came out on stage and the audience jeered him following the disastrous review of *Guy Domville* (which, now that you mention it, or now that I mention it, *is* one of the worst plays in theater history), wrote in his notebook, "I take up my *own* old pen again—the pen of all my old unforgettable

efforts and sacred struggles. . . . Large and full and high the future still opens." No self-pity for HJ! Not an iota, not a jot or a tittle or a titty, though an artist is permitted self-pity as long as it is expressed classily, as when E. M. Cioran says "the advantage of belonging to a minor country, of living without a background, with the unconcern of a tumbler, an idiot or a saint, or with the detachment of that serpent which, coiled around itself,

survives without food for years on end, as if it were some god of inanition or else concealed, beneath the suavity of its hebetude, some hideous sun." Overlooking for the moment that I have no idea what "hebetude" means and must look it up in the dictionary, where I find it means "dullness," I agree with Cioran, even though I am far from being Rumanian, which brings me to you: the day after my convo with George,

I am at Westminster College and telling the faculty and students how I tried to get Bo Diddley to talk to me once

only to have him look at me as though I'm a trifling white-ass motherfucker, and everybody laughs and says, That's a good one, David, though when I'm back in Tallahassee and looking myself up on the internet one night, I find a blog entry by a Westminster student that she has titled "David Kirby is

a Trifling White-Ass Motherfucker," though she spelled "trifling" with two fs, thus not only mangling a key word, as any of us is qualified to do, but also taking advantage of the casual blogger's sense of entitlement by not bothering to proofread her own writing. Why, you ask? My analysis, though I should be having this discussion with Harold Bloom, reader, not you (unless, of course, you, Mr. Bloom, are my reader this morning): I'd say

it's a matter of anxiety of influence in that she appropriates my line and makes it her own, getting credit from her no doubt countless blog readers for a turn of phrase that she thought clever—clever enough to steal, at any rate. Yet at the same time this same student is e-mailing me and telling me how wonderful I am, how smart and helpful I was during my Westminster visit and how she hopes that we'll always be poetry pals!

Yes, she's zipping back and forth between all these different selves, forging herself to others, as Albert Camus said, midway between the beauty she cannot do without and the community she cannot tear herself away from. Like Constable, she wants to be able to say "I never saw an ugly thing in my life," though I don't think Constable would have said that if he had lived to see the World's Ugliest Dog, a title won

by 14 year-old Sam, a pedigreed Chinese crested whose mottled flesh, crooked teeth, and opaque eyes were so repulsive that the judges recoiled when they saw him, though he went on to win the title two more times. Like Emerson,

the Westminster student wants such *croisements* or crossings or crossbreedings as the sea touching the shore or "the taste of two metals in contact" or the approach and departure

of a friend, moments that enlarge one's powers and are found most strongly not "in staying at home, nor yet in traveling, but in transitions from one to another." She wants to write, whether it's a poem like this one or a story of the kind

George Clark writes, and have her readers say, as an admirer did of Edward Thompson Taylor, the original of the preacher Father Mapple in *Moby-Dick*, that she did it "in a marvelous

way, by surprises, battery-shocks, hitty, witty wise suggestions and illustrations, flashing, burning, star-thoughts of faith, hope, and love, Jesus, holiness, and heaven, never to be forgotten." Thank you, Mr. Melville! And thank you, too, Mr. Emerson and Mr. James! Thanks to anyone who does anything on behalf of poetry, and not just my poems, but yours, too, reader, and you over there, yours as well.

-David Kirby



*Canadian Fireman*  
Meg Cook



*Lil' Bishop*  
Meg Cook

## Contributors

**Ed Ahern** resumed writing after forty odd years in foreign intelligence and international sales. He's had over 450 stories and poems published so far, and nine books. Ed works the other side of writing at Bewildering Stories where he manages a posse of eight review editors, and as lead editor at Scribes Microfiction.

**Eric Andrade** is an award-winning executive producer in the advertising industry. He founded The Athenaeum, a curated poetry reading series in collaboration with critically acclaimed and celebrated poets and writers, and the Institute of Contemporary Art in Miami, Florida. He is also a playwright, screenwriter, and former critically acclaimed stage actor. Eric has produced and directed his own and others' works for the stage in Chicago and New York City. He lives in the Northeast with his family.

**David Axelrod** is the author most recently of *Years Beyond the River* (Terrapin Books, 2021). *Skiing with Dostoyevsky: New & Selected Poems 1992-2022* is forthcoming from Lynx House Press in the autumn of 2024. He directs Bear Scratch Press and teaches letterpress printing at the University of Montana.

**NOËL Bennett's** lifework stems from a shift in consciousness while living and weaving with the Diné (Navajo) in New Mexico for eight years. Bennett's decades-long series of abstract paintings, *The Infinite Moment*, with multi-layered textured iridescence, manifest Mother Earth monumentally rising to mate with Father Sky, honoring the female/male balance. With art degrees from Stanford University and independent study with Richard Diebenkorn, she became a university art instructor. Moving to New Mexico ignited her immersion with Navajo textile. She has conducted over 200 symposia and authored 10 books on the subject.

**Jane Blanchard** of Georgia (USA) has recent work in *The Main Street Rag* and *The Robert Frost Review*. Her latest collection is *Metes and Bounds* (2023).

**Via Bulaon** is a self-taught Filipinx and clinically-proven Bipolar Type 2 lesbian visual artist based in Katipunan, Quezon City located in Manila, Philippines

**Abaine Campbell-Gardner** is a transgender male artist born in Hamilton, Ontario, 2003. He currently lives in Lowbanks with his family. Campbell-Gardner prefers to create multimedia work by working with found materials, traditional paints, ink, and traditional dry media. He focuses on narrative-driven, maximalist works and explorative subjects. Campbell-Gardner has just completed the Visual and Creative Arts degree at Fleming College. He intends to continue his career in art as an independent visual artist.

**Johnny Cate** is a poet, copywriter, and vintage T-shirt collector from Asheville, North Carolina.

**Natalie Christensen's** focus is ordinary settings, seeking the sublime in color fields and shadow. Exhibited in U.S./international museums and galleries, her honors include UAE Embassy culture tour delegate; upcoming Artist-in-Residence Chateau d'Orquevaux, France; commissioned cover shoot of Vladem Contemporary museum opening - Santa Fe New Mexican / Pasatiempo Special Edition, September 2023; and New Mexico Only Purchase Initiative selection, New Mexico Arts / Department of Cultural Affairs, 2023. Books include *Minimalism in Photography*, cover/featured artist, teNeues, Düsseldorf, Germany and *007 - Natalie Christensen*, Setanta Books, London. She has work in permanent collections and has been featured in art publications.

**Meg Cook's** interdisciplinary practice explores interpersonal relationships between strangers and the resulting power dynamics. Cook pulls inspiration from histories of sexuality, feminist art, current events, and personal experiences to explore human interactions without familiarity. She is drawn to craft materials and processes such as crochet, felting, and embroidery, in part because she values the result of time-consuming and labor-intensive work, but also because these materials and processes inflect a long history of gendered use by women. Cook's work embodies paradoxical relationships: cuteness and masculinity; attractiveness and unpleasantness; technology and the handmade.

**Cat Crochunis-Brown** is currently serving as a creative writing teaching artist in Philadelphia. She loves putting young people in touch with the creative and emotional learning opportunities that writing holds. In her own writing she uses repetition and form poetry to explore the subconscious, relationships, and identity formation. Her poetry is forthcoming in Moonstone Arts Center's 2023 New Voices Anthology."

**Walter Dermul** is a 'self-taught' artist. Gone full circle in many aspects of his former private and professional life, he started a new career in painting, just some years ago. He limits himself rigorously to representational subjects and oil paint. Sources of inspiration come from different sides. Most of his work deals with real people and their emotions, portraying the (in)ability to communicate with others, be it a partner, own children or all other people that are close. Happiness and sorrow, anger and angst, love and rebellion - there are enough colors

in life to be inspired by. It can be portraits of ordinary people that he knows, or scenes with people that he is moved by. Starting point are photos that he has taken himself of the subject, or pictures that he finds on news websites. These works are mostly autobiographical – sometimes inspired by pictures and super8-films taken by his father in the late 1950's and 60's.

**Christopher Dunn** holds an M.A. from Boston University and a Ph.D. from the University of Houston. He enjoys long, moonlit walks on Galveston Beach, picking up trash for the Surfrider Foundation, and snowboarding while listening to Leonard Cohen.

**Bart Edelman's** poetry collections include *Crossing the Hackensack*, *Under Damaris' Dress*, *The Alphabet of Love*, *The Gentle Man*, *The Last Mojito*, *The Geographer's Wife*, *Whistling to Trick the Wind*, and *This Body Is Never at Rest: New and Selected Poems 1993 – 2023*, forthcoming from Meadowlark Press. He has taught at Glendale College, where he edited *Eclipse*, a literary journal, and, most recently, in the MFA program at Antioch University, Los Angeles. His work has been widely anthologized in textbooks published by City Lights Books, Etruscan Press, Fountainhead Press, Harcourt Brace, Longman, McGraw-Hill, Prentice Hall, Simon & Schuster, Thomson/Heinle, the University of Iowa Press, Wadsworth, and others. He lives in Pasadena, California.

**Theodore Eisenberg** retired from the practice of labor law in 2014 to write. When words seem too restrictive, he paints. His poems have appeared in *The Aureorean*, *Thema*, *Rattle*, *Slipstream Press*, *Crosswinds Press*, *Lighthouse Literary Journal*, *Main Street Rag*, *concis*, *Philadelphia Stories*, *Aji Magazine*, *Every Writer*, *Blue Mountain Review*, *Valley Voices*, *Hamilton Stone Review*, *Rust & Moth*, *The Ekphrastic Review* and many other journals. His chapbook, "This," was published by Finishing Line Press in 2017.

**Jillian Elkin** is a writer based in Brooklyn, New York. Her writing has appeared in *Salt Hill Journal* and *Verge Magazine*.

**Nick Flynn** is the author of six collections of poetry, all published by Graywolf, including *I Will Destroy You* (2019) and *Low* (2023). His bestselling memoir *Another Bullshit Night in Suck City* (Norton, 2004), was made into a film starring Robert DeNiro (Focus Features, 2012), and has been translated into fifteen languages. www.nickflynn.org.

**Duncan Forbes**. British poet. Duncan's poems have been published by Faber, Secker and Enitharmon, who brought out a Selected Poems in 2009, drawn from five previous collections. For his most recent collection of poems, *Human Time* (2020), see www.duncanforbes.com. He read English at Oxford and has taught for many years.

**Frances Gaudio** has had several poems and short stories published online and in print. Her two novels, *The Listener* and *The Home Straight* have been published by Veneficia, a small UK press and she has had had a textbook on veterinary dermatology published by Elsevier Science.

**Joseph Geskey** resides outside Columbus, Ohio where his first collection of poems, *Alms for the Ravens*, will be published by Main Street Rag Publishing Company. He has poems forthcoming from *POETRY EAST*, *Tar River Poetry*, and others."

**Dan Gray's** journey with the lathe began twenty years ago and, like most in this art form, started with a block of wood, turning at high speed and shaped by metal tools. While he immediately felt a connection to this art form, the limitation imposed by a preordained size was limiting. There were, he discovered, other options. Imagine taking a flat board, and through planning, manipulation, and reassembly producing a bowl, a vase, or any form desired. This is an art that combines free form meditation on size and shape, with an analytical engineering thought process. This is segmented sculpting.

**Carole Greenfield** grew up in Colombia and now lives in New England, where she teaches multilingual learners at a public elementary school. Her work has appeared in such places as *Beltway Poetry Quarterly*, *Sky Island Journal*, *Glacial Hills Review* and *Dodging the Rain*.

**Emma Griffiths** is a London-based artist, originally from a small working-class town, Ellesmere Port, in North West England. Emma's practice is an exploration of self. It's her psychoanalysis, therapy, and documentation of her curiosity about the complexities of being human. Emma is very conscious about the human ability to imagine, dream, invent, and create other worlds. Emma's perspective of art is more scientific and analytical as Emma is naturally a researcher and utilizes art as a tool to discover.

**Shaun Griffiths** is an interdisciplinary artist currently teaching Art Foundations at Sam Houston State University in Texas. He received his MFA from Alfred University in New York in 2014. In 2009, he received a MA in Glass

at the University of Sunderland, UK as part of a Fulbright Postgraduate Award, and his BFA from San Jose State University, California in 2008.

**Flavie Guerrand** was born in France and lives and works in Berlin. In the mid-1990s, she was a committed member of the French techno scene. Organizing raves parties offered her a distinct form of spectatorship. A lens that enabled insightful depictions of the underground culture. This perspective is striking and evident in her work today. She only began to film and photograph the lifestyles she led some years later. The legacy unravels further, when she moves to Berlin in 2009 and finds her space in the blooming queer scene.

**Tara Joyce** is a queer poet living in San Marcos, Texas with her girlfriend and cat. She publishes zines of poetry and satire with the SM Kitchen Collective, and posts very bad clown drawings on her Instagram. When not writing, she works at a grocery store avoiding customers, and at a sandwich shop putting her college education to good use. She can be reached at [SanMarcosSink@protonmail.com](mailto:SanMarcosSink@protonmail.com)

**Yuliia Khovbosh**a, a Ukrainian-born sculptor now based in Canada, migrated to Halifax in 2023 due to the war in her motherland. Born in 1989, she delves into sculpture to explore the intricate facets of art, breaking free from singular perspectives. Drawing inspiration from nature, her work reflects on human-nature connections, environmental concerns, gender equality, and wartime struggles. She graduated with a Bachelor of Audiovisual Arts in 2010 and transitioned from TV-directing to creating intricate sculptures using diverse materials. Her pieces were exposed in various international art exhibitions. Yuliia has been Longlisted for the 2023 Norval Morrisseau Award for Visual Arts

**David Kirby** teaches at Florida State University, where he is the Robert O. Lawton Distinguished Professor of English. His latest books are a poetry collection, *Help Me, Information*, and a textbook modestly entitled *The Knowledge: Where Poems Come From and How to Write Them*. Kirby is also the author of *Little Richard: The Birth of Rock 'n' Roll*, which the *Times Literary Supplement* described as “a hymn of praise to the emancipatory power of nonsense.” He is currently on the editorial board of Alice James Books.

**Rachel McGee** is a Denton, Texas based fiber and multimedia artist who uses traditional fibers techniques and performance to explore spirituality and gender identity. Their recent work centers around relationships between women and women-identifying people, especially mothers and daughters. More of their work can be found on Instagram at [@rachelmcee95](https://www.instagram.com/rachelmcee95).

**César Mora Moreau**. Colombian writer. Author of the novels “Al final, el océano” (2019), awarded the Barranquilla Distrital Novel Prize, and “Siempre nos quedará Bogotá” (2018), finalist of the National Short Novel Prize. His short story collection “Alas para lanzarme de un puente y volar” (2020) was awarded by the Secretariat of Culture of Barranquilla in 2020.

**Loren Niemi** is a Minnesota based poet, author and innovative storyteller whose work includes a 2020 Midwest Book Award winning short story collection, “What Haunts Us”, a poetic memoir “A Breviary for the Lost” and the just published, “Circus Rex” a novel of romance, catastrophe and offbeat humor. more:[www.lorenNiemiStories.com](http://www.lorenNiemiStories.com)

**Kryštof Novotný** lives in the Czech Republic. He has been painting since he was a child. Since 2017, he has been painting self-portrait every year, and imprints his current life situations and moods in each of them.

**Robyn Michaels** learned to groom dogs as a teenager and is now retired. She has won awards in dog grooming contests, and she has titled dogs in performance and conformation. She didn't go to college until she was 30, and took CLEP exams to avoid prerequisites. She has an undergraduate degree in anthropology with concentrations in African & Indian studies and a master's in urban planning. She was a Peace Corps Volunteer in Malawi, A U.N. election supervisor in Bosnia, and has also volunteered in Kenya and India.

**Richard Risemberg** was born to a mixed and mixed-up family in Argentina, and dragged to LA as a child to escape the fascist regime. He's spent the next few decades exploring the darker corners of the America Dream and writing stories, poems, and essays based on his experiences. He has published widely in the last few years, as you can see at <http://crowtreebooks.com/richard-risemberg-publications/>.

**Helena S. Rodriguez** is a Texas based photographer and video artist. Her photography explores the effects of the trauma she has endured. She uses projectors, mirrors, and in-camera effects to create haunting photographs that capture my inner psyche. While personal in origin, her work has an ambiguity and mystery that people can relate to or recoil from.

**RUNE (aka Rute Norte)** was born and lives in Lisbon, Portugal. She graduated from the University of Lisbon,

and recently received her Master of Arts in Painting from Fine Arts Faculty of the University of Lisbon (2022). Her master's thesis focused on the theme of “Artist-Travellers”. Additionally, she studied Photography at Cenjor, the Professional Training Center for Journalists, in Lisbon (182 hours of classes, 2018). She has also completed the Painting course at the National Society of Fine Arts, in Lisbon (three academic years, 2002-05). RUNA has participated in more than thirty exhibitions, individual and collective, in Portugal, UK, Germany and Italy.

**George Ryan** was born in Ireland and graduated from University College Dublin. He lives in New York City. Elkhound published his *Finding Americas*, as well as *Other Places, Other Times*, and most recently *Cumulonimbus*. His poems are nearly all about incidents that involve real people in real places and use straightforward language.

**Fiona Selden** is a writer from Phoenixville, Pennsylvania. She writes whatever she feels possessed to, whether that be sci-fi, fantasy, a personal essay, or poetry, but whatever genre they write in, it will probably contain animals or animal imagery.

**Mohammad Amin Shafiei** has been enthusiastically taking pictures and recording his feelings with a camera. His approach in photography is experimental, emotional and formalistic.

**Catherine Eaton Skinner** illuminates the balance of opposites, reflecting mankind's attempts at connection. Publications include *Magazine 43*; *Southwest Contemporary*; *MVIBE*; *LandEscape Art Review*; *Art Magazineium*; and her monograph *108* (Radius Books). 40+ solo and group exhibitions: Pie Projects; Perry & Carlson; Waterworks Gallery; International Art Museum of America; Las Cruces Museums: Branigan Cultural Center; Summerlin Library/Performing Arts Center; Enterprise Library Gallery; Missouri 6-city traveling exhibition; Wilding Museum; Cape Cod Museum; Yellowstone Art Museum; and High Desert Museum.

**Quincey Spagnoletti** earned her Bachelor of Arts from Colgate University where she was the recipient of the Gary M. Hoffer Prize for Excellence in Photography. She is a graduate of the Post-baccalaureate certificate at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts (SMFA) at Tufts University and will graduate with her MFA at SMFA at Tufts University in May, 2024. Spagnoletti has most recently exhibited at The SE Center for Photography in Greenville, South Carolina, Panopticon Gallery in Boston, Leica Gallery Boston in Boston, MA and Praxis Photo Arts Center in Minneapolis.

**Jeremy Starn** is a multidisciplinary artist and photographer who investigates subcultures around the world. After living for several years at a wooden shipbuilding commune in Costa Rica, he has returned to the USA to continue documenting alternative manifestations of imaginary futures.

**Pasquale Trozzolo** is a retired madman from Kansas. He is a Pushcart Prize nominee, and his work appears in numerous journals and anthologies, including *Sunspot Literary Journal*, *The Pangolin Review*, *Superpresent*, *What Rough Beast*, *34th Parallel*, *From Whispers to Roars*, and *50 Give or Take*. He is the author of three chapbooks, *Before the Distance* (The Poetry Box, December 2020), *UN/Reconciled* (Kelsay Books, 2022), and *Seeing—In A Small Town* (Finishing Line Press – forthcoming 2024). Still no tattoos or MFA, he continues complicating his life by living out as many retirement clichés as possible. <https://pasqualetrozzolo.com/>

**Michael Webster** is an artist who focuses on the social organization of space through site-specific projects, sculpture, and installation. His work is context-driven and materially attuned, investigating the effects of power on social geography with a focus on long-term participatory projects rooted in the Southern United States. Webster was recently named the 2023 South Carolina State Fellow by South Arts and has participated in residencies at ChaNorth, the Hambidge Center for Creative Arts and Sciences, Elsewhere Living Museum, and Penland School of Craft. He received a Bachelor of Fine Arts from East Carolina University and a Master of Fine Arts from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Currently, he is an assistant professor at Wofford College in Spartanburg, South Carolina.

**Erin Wilson's** poems have recently appeared or are forthcoming in *B O D Y*, *Tar River Poetry*, *Potomac Review*, *Verse Daily*, and *Atlanta Review*. Her first collection is *At Home with Disquiet*; her second, *Blue* (whose title poem won a Pushcart), is about depression, grief, and the transformative power of art. She lives in a small town on Robinson-Huron Treaty Territory in Northern Ontario, Canada, the traditional lands of the Anishinawbek.

**Micheal Wood** is an American artist. His work explores relationships between self and psyche and interpersonal connections. Focusing heavily on homosexual and homoerotic behaviors and imagery but not solely queer themes. The intersection of tender beauty and the profanity is often examined. Wood specializes in photography and painterly use of inks and mixed media. He has trained in Michigan and Florida.



