

*Inverted Syntax*

Fissured Tongue

Volume 2 January 2021



"Certainty 1" Lisa Berley, mixed media, 22 x 30 in., 2013

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We accept submissions only through our submission manager. Our 2021 general submission window will open March through June and our contest submission will open April through June. *Inverted Syntax's* 2021 Sublingua Prize for Poetry contest judge is still to be determined. All poetry contest submissions will be read by the editorial staff. Editors and judge will not have access to the identities of the submitters. The editors will meet as a group to select the thirty semi-finalists to be sent to the judge, who will select the ten finalists including the winning poem which will be awarded a \$500 prize.

About the Volume Two's Featured Cover Artist

*Lisa Berley*

Lisa Berley began her career in San Francisco as an art director in CGI and animation after receiving her BFA. She integrated painting, photography and CGI in digital work. Returning to NY for two decades Berley exhibited abstract mixed media works on paper. She moved to Colorado in 2016 continuing to work from deconstructed found images and recently combining it with erasure poetry after the accidental death of her younger son.

About the Art

"My work involves a process of exploring the deconstruction of found words and images. Fragments of appropriated newsprint images are deconstructed and then reconstructed to make new images and in some cases erasure poems. Through this method the visual and text information is transformed."

# Letter from the Editor

*Jesica Davis*

Welcome to Fissured Tongue Volume Two! It's been a long time coming. We, the Inverted Syntax Editors, accepted some of these pieces over a year ago, and we all know how much change in perspective 2020 brought, macro and micro, personal and political. As Managing Editor of the Fissured Tongue series, I want to personally thank every contributor who patiently waited and worked with us through times of overwhelming change and unknown circumstances.

If you're not familiar with Fissured Tongue, it's now our primary online publishing presence where we share some of the stunning work we receive during our submission windows but cannot fit into our annual print issue. With Fissured Tongue, we seek new voices, new encounters, shifting perspectives. It was therefore a pleasure and honor to discover that several of the pieces we published in Fissured Tongue Volume Two are the first publication for their authors. The Inverted Syntax editorial board reads blind, so we did not know that we'd selected so many first pubs until the publication coordination began.

With the exception of our occasional [blog](#) posts and [Art of the Postcard](#) series, the new Fissured Tongue volumes will be a sub-label or imprint of Inverted Syntax Press LLC and our only formal online publication. In support, all pieces previously, serially published in Fissured Tongue (2019-2020) have been compiled into [Volume One](#).

Going forward, we may continue to switch between intermittent Fissured publications and dropping a full volume, like this one you're about to read. If I've learned anything in the last year it's that we need to stay open to change, flexible enough to adapt to whatever feels necessary or urgent in the moment, even if sometimes that's taking a step back to breathe and collect.

So we invite you to spend some time with Fissured Tongue Volume Two. Take a look around, linger in the spaces of what our brilliant contributors have to say. It contains themes of justice and loss, memory and embodiment, attempts to respect and understand the past as we move into an updated future, even if some days it's hard to see beyond tomorrow.

Join us in being ready for surprise, staying open to change, aware of the possibilities that surround us.

With love,  
Jesica Davis  
Fissured Tongue Managing Editor  
*Inverted Syntax* Associate Editor





"Portal 1" Lisa Berley, mixed media, 22 x 30 in., 2013

## Goldilocks and her Ghost

*Maria Takolander*

The cottage had been hollowed by the child's death.

Still, Mamma made the porridge, strongminded as a witch.

He looked into the mirror of a wound.

Saw her vanish through the crash of it.

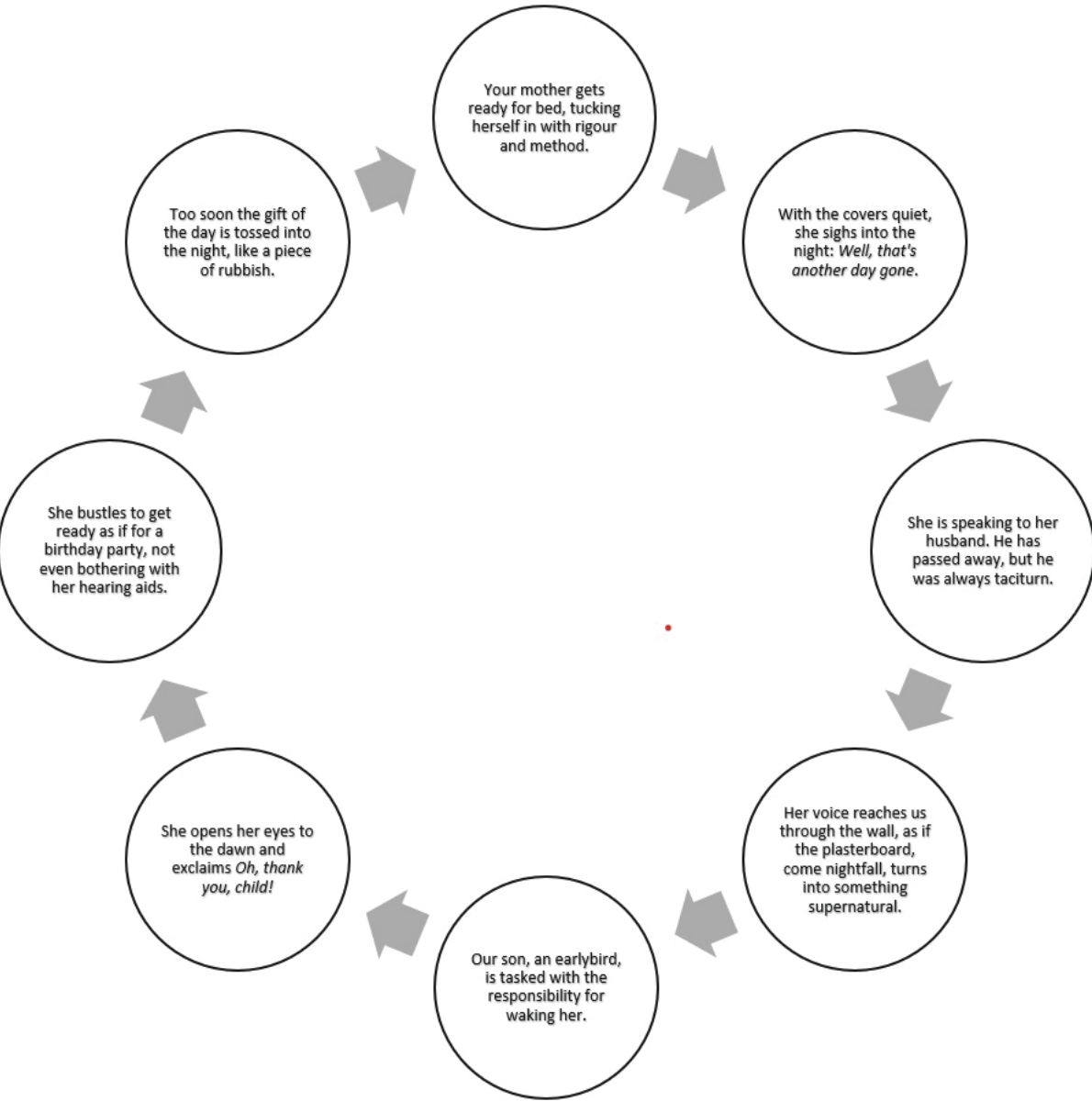
The high-chair splintered from the weight of eeriness.

When baby was born, he felt things keenly as infants do.



Grieve, Repeat

Maria Takolander



Night, Falling

Maria Takolander

In Memory of CR

What did you see as night was falling?

The vastness of the plains, the grass radiant with its secret knowledge, and then the darkness deepening.

Did the world speak to you as to a shaman?

There are always signs and daemons, but they were no longer for me to speak or sing.

Was it so dark you could not see?

At first there was a moon, shedding its bony light.

Did others hold you?

There were so many —of my own skin and smell and hair and blood—but I alone was being ravaged.

Did you feel the presence of god?

Only love, and the unbearable tragedy of its passing.

Did sleep finally come for you?

The night always comes from within.

And when you woke?

My body was quiet as a beast with its throat cut.

And now?

Can't you feel it? Life is still longing for us.

# Happiness

Maria Takolander

History recognises Turun Söl as a standard disappointment in the ancient practice of poetry (/ 'pəʊɪtri/ *n.* Now rare. Solitary word game played by the melancholy and potentially narcissistic.) While Söl's name has become synonymous with an excessive form of morbid verse, it should be noted, if the translations of Söl's soot-stained diaries are to be trusted, that the poet's quest may have been originally optimistic. One must keep in mind that Söl's goal was never to describe mirth or excitement, which are merely temporary conditions, easily tainted by inebriation or schadenfreude. The object of the poet's mission was more stable and pure. Yet evidence of it was so ambiguous. Like pain, it was hard to credit in others. In fact, there was always the possibility that it did not exist at all. One could contrive its appearance simply by being acquiescent and inactive, as a monk or husband might. In any case, it was important to adopt an attitude of scepticism in order not to appear a sentimental fool. The greatest difficulty posed by Söl's subject, of course, was that it avoided words as if they carried the plague. It protected itself like a blue-blood bounded by forest-fed walls of fire. It destroyed images of itself before they could be generated; the ultimate iconoclast, one might say. In the end, Turun Söl is said to have found herself writing obsessively about her subject's manifold and miserable antitheses, such that it seems she herself wondered if language was invented for the sole purpose of expressing pain.

# About the Author

Maria Takolander

Maria Takolander is an Australian writer. She is the author of two books of poetry, *The End of the World* (Giramondo 2014) and *Ghostly Subjects* (Salt 2009), with a third, *Trigger Warning*, forthcoming with UQP. Her poems have been widely anthologised, including in *The Best Australian Poems* and *The Best Australian Poetry*, as well as in special 'Australian poetry' issues of *Agenda* (UK), *Chicago Quarterly Review*, *Kenyon Review*, *Lichtungen* (Austria), and *Michigan Quarterly Review*. Australia's Radio National aired a program about her poetry in 2015, and she has performed her poetry on national TV and at the 2017 International Poetry Festival of Medellín, Colombia. Maria is also a prize-winning short-story writer and the author of *The Double (and Other Stories)* (Text 2013). Maria's website is [mariatakolander.com](http://mariatakolander.com).

# About the Work

"**Grieve, Repeat**" is an elegiacal poem, which uses the rogue form of a cyclical chart to reflect on the repetitive nature of daily routines.

"**Night Falling**" is an elegy for the extraordinary Australian performance poet Candy Royalle, whom I will always remember for her radical championing of love, vulnerability, openness. The poem attempts to recover her voice through the rule-breaking form of an interview with the dead.

"**Goldilocks**" is an elegy for a miscarried child, whose absence is not filled by a subsequent child. The poem fractures the form of a fairytale, 'Goldilocks and the Three Bears,' which is also about the condition of being 'missing.'

"**Happiness**" is an ironic reflection on the ways in which poetry tends to focus on intense emotional states characterised by unhappiness. Would it be possible to disrupt that tradition and write about the apparently elusive condition of happiness?





*“Head of a Woman” Eugène Carrière, Aquatint, 12 5/16 × 8 3/4 in., ca. 1904. Open source from The Met.*

## **Kindred**

*Moachiba Jamir*

She sat there nameless. Mangyangba’s 90 year old bones creaked with every step he took towards her — this crippled woman sitting beside the fire. She looked up at him with a face toughened by the harshness of time.

“I’m hungry,” he announced. The woman sighed as she took some rice from the pot beside her and placed it on his wooden plate. Funny how she knew that was his plate, Mangyangba thought.

#

The village was waking up to the calls of morning as Mangyangba made his way towards the wooden chair in front of his thatch house. He was never sure about anything these days, but sitting on this chair was something he definitely knew to be routine.

The old chair creaked under his measly weight and his bones creaked as if in response. As he settled down into his uncomfortable but familiar position, he began searching and diving into the depths of his mind — a nautical cartography. He liked to let his mind wander as he sat on his chair; he wouldn’t let it go very far for he was not sure what lay beneath the depth of his ocean, but just enough to help him stay connected with himself, his past, and maybe his future. The morning light was bathing his crumpled old skin with its golden rays and he felt contented with his place in the world. As the day progressed though, the harshness of the sunlight started to prick his already dry skin, kneading it to its demands, but he did not want to move. He found out he was more likely to bear something painful as opposed to something unlikeable, and sitting here in the sun was slightly more painful than unlikeable.

Now who were these people walking by his old house. Mangyangba stared at the blurry faces that passed by. These young people walk too fast, he thought. How could he possibly recognise their faces? But Lo! There was old Meren’s nephew speeding by; Mangyangba had accompanied his uncle fishing once, and had almost drowned during the ordeal. Yes, yes he remembered.

And there was — Semermayang — yes... that was his name... Semermayang. He remembered of course. Mangyangba had worked on his grandfather’s field with his age-mates way back when. Yes. He remembered. Semermayang gave him a wave of his arm as he passed by, “Going to the fields grandfather. I hope everything is well?” Mangyangba was happy to have been noticed, and replied with a raised hand as he croaked out a genial “Hau hau” in confirmation. Everything was well.

#

“You’re burning yourself,” the crippled woman announced her presence from behind the door.

“Mmm,” said Mangyangba. It was a beautiful day out, what problem did she have with him sitting out here. “I’m not moving from here,” he resolved in his mind.



The crippled woman familiar with his obstinacy hobbled forward and placed a shawl on the clothesline in front of him. Its shadow covered the man, but it also obstructed his view of the street beyond. As she was going back, Mangyangba slowly moved the shawl away so that he could see the streets again. Much better, he thought.

“You’ll burn your skin I said, you stupid oaf!” She shouted as she put the shawl back in place.

“I can’t see them!” His voice sounded like smoke, a wisp appearing one second and gone the next.

“Who?”

“The people, the villagers... I can’t see them,” He seemed to plead.

She looked at the people walking by and wondered how they looked like to his hazy old eyes. She herself could hardly recognise any of these young folks hurrying about their lives. She wondered who he saw when he looked out at the streets, his mind clouded by its own deceit. The crippled woman slowly trudged back to the clothesline and fixed the shawl’s shadow to cover Mangyangba’s upper half. He could still see the streets but wouldn’t get the brunt of the harsh sun. She hurried back inside the kitchen.

#

Her language was familiar but her voice... it was the voice that Mangyangba could not place, the cadence, that scratchy sound as she spewed out her words. He had heard it before but he just couldn’t associate it with a past that he was familiar with. He heard it again when she brought out some tea for him.

“Don’t drink it too quickly; it’s still very hot,” she said as she handed him the cup.

“Mmm,” he agreed and she hurried back inside the dark kitchen as if scared of exposing her crippled foot in the sun for too long.

The heat was quickly transferring to his palms as he held the bottom of the metal cup. It might have hurt him when he was younger, but over the years his hands had adapted to the harshness of the heat and now it felt only a little more painful than a slight singe — painful but bearable, just like his life.

“Uncle, you look fairly young today.” Mangyangba could see two elderly women walking towards him as they cackled at their own remark. Mangyangba let out an old grin as he joined in on their amusement. “Sit sit,” He invited them as he gestured beside him and when he realized there were no seats, he called out to the crippled woman with a new vigour, “Ayyy! Bring some seats out for our guests,” He said “And prepare some tea for them too,” He added after a beat.

“No no, don’t bother,” The women said to the crippled woman who had come out to see if the guests were real or just another figment of his imagination. “We were on our way to meet Sentibenla’s new-born, but we noticed uncle and just had to come see him,” she explained their presence to the crippled woman.

Smiling and welcoming them, she brought out seats for the two women and told them to stay put until she prepared some tea for them, brushing away their half-hearted refusals as excuses. Before she went in though, there was a short exchange of pleasantries between the three women who seemed rather familiar with each other, but Mangyangba was not listening to them. He was trying to figure out who these two were and how they were connected to him. He wrestled with his mind, trying to make old connections, churning up memories from his hazy past and reaching out to a time he had long left behind. But all he could pull out from his swamp filled mind were reeds and mud.

“Uncle,” said one of them genially, “Do you remember who we are?”

Stuck in an ocean of oblivion, Mangyangba was drowning, panting and gaging for some kind of rescue; a breath of air, a helping hand... something. But all he got were these people asking him if he remembered how to swim. “You’re those people from down the street,” He said. The women cackled in response to his usual generalisation.

“I wish they’d just tell me their names,” Mangyangba thought to himself. But they didn’t. Instead they talked about all the stories of the bygone days: his halcyon days when stunted memory did not stop him from venturing out of his house, into the village and the vastness of the fields beyond. They talked about how he used to be the pride of the village, the suitor among suitors, who could harvest ten jute bags of tapioca roots by himself, a warrior among men. But for all their praises, he was oddly getting detached from the conversation, mostly because he couldn’t remember most of the events they were talking about. They seemed like accomplishments of a man who had died a long time ago; he was not that man.

By the time the women left after having drunk their tea and spoken their fill, Mangyangba was exhausted. He had wanted a peaceful morning without his mind being prodded by the prongs of shared memory. He believed his memories were his alone, for him to keep, and he didn’t like people talking about events of his own past, muddying memories that he thought were clean. He often had memories of what he thought had happened in his past, only to find out from others that his version was always lacking in some place or the other and he did not like that at all; it made him feel useless, the way he couldn’t even guard his own memories, the way people decided they knew more about his past than he knew himself.

#

The day’s events had affected Mangyangba much more than he would dare to admit. So he came inside the kitchen earlier than he usually did, just to get away from any more people wanting to add their own tributaries into his stream of personal memories.

Mangyangba slowly made his way to his chair in the kitchen. It had been placed at just the right

distance from the fireplace: not too close to get overheated and not too far to be chilled by the slight breeze coming in from the open door on the other side of the house, left open to let the smoke from the fire escape. He liked this chair too. It held certain memories for him which he knew were true. His grandchildren... yes his grandchildren used to surround him as he sat in his chair; him eloquently regaling them with folktales and them fascinatingly fixated on his every word. Some of the younger ones could not have patience enough to listen to the stories and would go play around the kitchen, making up their own stories as they lived in their own funny worlds. He could not remember all their names or their faces but he was almost certain that they did exist; they were as real as he was.

The gloomy smoke rising from the kitchen fire had blackened the thatch walls with soot and the crippled woman was hunched near it, fussing over what was probably their meal. At that moment, Mangyangba didn't realize it but he missed his grandchildren dearly. "This kitchen used to be so full of life," was the only thought he could muster up to satiate the nagging feeling in his stomach.

"When are the grandchildren coming to visit?" Mangyangba asked the crippled woman suddenly. She was visibly taken aback by his unsolicited enquiry. Mangyangba never really talked unless he needed something from her.

"You know they only come to the village during their winter breaks," she replied as she stoked the fire.

"And what is it now?"

"July"

"Oh"

She pulled out the rice filled aluminium pot that had been keeping warm in the coal filled hearth. Taking Mangyangba's wooden plate, she scooped up some rice from the pot onto his plate and then put in some boiled mustard leaves along with the water it was boiled in. It was still too early for his lunch but the crippled woman decided that she would rather finish off this task earlier than later. Mangyangba was watching her intently during this whole process. Her manoeuvres were very mechanical in its routine but fluid in its execution; it was as if her upper half was making up for the rigidity of her lower half.

The wooden floor of the stilted kitchen provided acoustics for the woman's steps as she limped towards Mangyangba. It was a heavy thump of her normal right foot and then the soft pad of the crippled left foot which was quickly raised up and taken over by the right again, as if it was ashamed to defile the floor by its crookedness. Thump...pad-thump...pad-thump...pad-thump... she limped towards Mangyangba with his plate of food.

Mangyangba tried to dive deep into his mind, into his past, trying to discover the cause behind her crippled foot, but he found himself fighting invisible waves of oblivion, finally coming up for air, empty-handed. He decided it was better to ask.

"What's wrong with your feet?"

She didn't seem to register his question. She sat down beside him and started to feed him the rice from her hands but he moved his head away.

"I can eat by myself," he grumbled.

"Fine," she spat out, putting the plate on his lap.

He noticed she didn't bring him water to wash his hands but it didn't matter much to him. He slowly rolled up the rice in his old palms, making sure he mixed it with the mustard leaf broth, and gulped it down hungrily though he wasn't really hungry. As careful as he was, tiny blobs of mashed rice fell from his hands on their way to his mouth. He looked over expecting reproach, but the crippled woman didn't seem to be paying attention to him.

#

The sun was starting to droop into her inevitable slumber and sitting inside the kitchen the whole day was making Mangyangba restless. He wanted to go out, having already forgotten the reason behind his self-imposed incarceration. The crippled woman was nowhere to be seen. She had been shrouded in silence after their little spat during the day and even forgot to serve him his black tea after his meal.

Slowly rising up from his chair, Mangyangba — hunched and spindly — walked out of the kitchen into the streets for the first time in many years. The ground was not gravelly beneath his worn out rubber sandals and he was confused. He couldn't recognise the bitumen lined roads of his village. The world was swirling orange around him as he looked at the whirlpool of faces spinning around him under the dying sun. Faces stared at him: faces familiar, unfamiliar, and those in between the interstices of these two, but he couldn't differentiate one from the others as they unwittingly crashed into each other, greedily seeking their chance to crash onto his mind's sandy shores.

He stood there on his deserted island, drifting, seeking to find the shores of a place he no longer recognised or remembered — where was he? Who was he?

A name, a voice, reached out to him, pulling him out of his own mind. "Oba," the voice called out, no longer spewing her words: "Father." Yes, he was a father, a grandfather, a husband. He was Mangyangba, and he still is Mangyangba; how aptly his parents had named him Mangyangba: "one who grieves." How appropriate that he had been intimate with grief all his life but now that he was old enough to retrospect on his grief, his mind didn't even allow him that dignity.

Her cragged hands held his wrinkly ones. Both hardened by the pains of life. Like two islands never destined to meet, they crashed into each other. She held his hands and softly tugged on it, begging him to come back home. "Lapunaro." yes... that was her name: his water lily. Oh how

fragile she had looked within his arms. He had held her and known that she would grow up to be a much envied woman, a rare lily among thorns and roses. But what had happened to her? What happened in their conjoined past that made her grovel so, hiding in the darkness of the kitchen, caring for a father who didn't even remember her.

All these thoughts swam up to shore while they slowly made their way into their little dark hole they called home. They walked the planks of their kitchen together. His stiff shuffle mingled with her stunted steps and the floor seemed to creak to their eccentric tango. She ushered him into his chair with a care she hadn't shown him for a long time and then went deeper into the kitchen to prepare their dinner.

#

Dinner was rice, boiled chayote and a dab of tomato chutney. She sat beside him and fed him, this time without protestation. The fire was crackling in the corner, a soft evening breeze was coming in through the open door and every now and then Mangyangba's old lips would smack as he chewed his food.

"Lapunaro," He called out as she was washing his plate in the sink after dinner. "Tell me what happened to your feet."

She stopped her scrubbing and stared at the water escaping from the plate into the little hole at the bottom. It had always been this way, she thought. She did not expect any better from him, but she could not help but feel sad, neglected and dejected, even more than usual. Her topography never fully explored because she had been stuck with him her whole life. She had been the second most beautiful daughter, the only sibling to be affected by polio — permanently crippling her feet and her future, she had found a husband but lost him to drugs, she had borne children but they could never live up to the reputation of her sister's children who lived in the city — just like she could never live up to her father's expectations, just like she could never be fully loved by her father no matter what she did, just like she was remembered only by the name of her sister Lapunaro—her own name lost in her father's sea of failures, him refusing to rescue it. It was better this way, she had always comforted herself, it did not even matter, she used to say to pacify her anger, but it did, it did to her and she hated him every day for it.

"Do you want some black tea?" she said hoping he would give up his questioning.

"Mmm," he mumbled in affirmation.

She put some tea leaves into his usual cup and poured boiling water over it, handing over the cup as she took up the chair next to him. They were both silent as Mangyangba occasionally slurped his tea. Time seemed to loop inside this kitchen; everyday seemed no different than any other day. Whatever she said, whatever she did, her father would wake up the next day forgetting most of whatever happened the day before, with random memories spurting out during the course of the day. She often wondered why she even took care of him when he would not even remember her name the next day. The only thing that seemed to break the loop was the winter holidays when her children would come home from the city, along with their more accomplished cousins.

During these days, both of them would at least try to pretend that everything was okay, that they both did not feel like giving up every other day, as one drowned deeper into his own oblivion and the other choked harder in her neglect.

Mangyangba slowly stood up and she was drawn out of her thoughts.

"Where are you going?" He slowly shuffled his body in the direction of the toilet.

"Do you need to pee?" she asked as she held his hand for the second time that day.

"Mmm," he nodded.

She guided him to the bathroom on the other side of the house. It was a full moon night and she could hear crickets and critters chirping in the evening breeze. As he stood there, she unbuttoned his pants and turned around. But instead of the drip of piss hitting the toilet, she heard the splutter of shit. As she turned around, she saw Mangyangba standing there with his pants splattered with shit and piss. She could see his eyes and they seemed blank; there was nothing inside them, not even embarrassment. He didn't say anything, he couldn't. As the daughter took off his pants and cleaned him up, his eyes seemed to water for the tiniest second before it retreated back into its cave of forgetfulness. He stood there staring blankly and mumbling to himself, until she brought in a clean pair of pants for him. He did not wear undergarments because he would soil them occasionally and it meant more work for her.

She guided him back to his room and settled him off to sleep. As she went back to her dark corner of the kitchen, she began to think how the next day would be another loop and the sun would shine down upon his old skin again, and she would be there to give him the shade he needed, she would be there to feed him the food he craved and she would be there to offer him the love he never gave her. He might not remember her, but this was her lot in life and she was determined to see it through until one of them gave up on surviving this lonely thing they were forced to call life.



About the Author

Moachiba Jamir

Moachiba Jamir lives in a small town called Kohima in Nagaland and is currently an undergrad at EFLU, Hyderabad. He is a participant in the IWP Summer Institute pre-program of the University of Iowa. He hopes that his writings will be able shed some light on the often underrepresented regions of Nagaland, India.

About the Work

"Keeping in tune with *Inverted Syntax*'s admirable endeavours to give a voice to BIPOC, "Kindred" seeks to champion the intricacies of everyday life of a Naga person. It, in its essence, moves against the silent sufferings and neglect of tribal people, shouting that "We are here! We are suffering just like the rest of you! Do not forget about us!" With the author's present economic condition, this publication would not have been possible if the reading fee hadn't been waived for BIPOC and so the publication of this piece in itself is a testament to the wonderful work that Inverted Syntax is doing in alleviating the conditions of BIPOC, one piece at a time."



"Lenox Avenue" Sargent Claude Johnson, Lithograph, 12 1/2 x 8 1/2 in., 1938. Open source from The Met.

## BRIGHT

*Devynity Wray*

An anomaly  
and one without apology  
I come from those on the short stick of the monopoly  
Last left to find and discover what the world been known about  
And then concealed  
Leaving me to sift through these diluted truths  
And doled out to me is the character of ill repute  
I'm the only one still baffled by how I am treated  
for the tusks of elephants and Harambe  
seem to see more justice than my kind ever will  
The seldom compensated  
Consistently silenced yet constantly the topic of conversation  
Always at a loss  
That's stolen property  
Kings and queens stolen as property  
Treated as commodity  
For profit  
And made possession  
Ever present is the oppression  
& my humanity is always up for debate  
My humanity is always up for debate  
No matter how I walk on the narrow  
No matter how tall or how straight  
I am the criminal  
The most debased  
And they'll say things to me like....“well, you know there's always been slaves”  
And it takes  
A great deal of bravery in every reaction  
Composed of a whole only known is my fraction  
Composure key to my survival cuz my every reaction  
Determines my fate in these incendiary times  
You gon have to pardon me you see I predate  
The data suite  
The database  
I go unmentioned like the Sudanese pyramids  
I'm comprised of Negro spirituals, Kwanzaa celebrations and street talk  
Nina Simone lyrics, Quincy Jones rhythms and sweet stalks of corn on the cob  
Buttered down pepper paprika and diva in my feature  
And I just want to give a word of homage to the congregation  
For what it's worth

I grew up in the church  
Methodist turned Pentecostal  
That went to Catholic school  
a whole mess  
Mean I seen more white Jesus than a little bit  
For mine it was forbidden to be literate  
For centuries  
Like how would we have texted with no concept of the letters: the parentheses  
I precede the refreshing of feeds  
Yes,  
The type to set a precedent  
A different element  
Of a previous time  
Prism in the light  
Schism on the line  
May come off as unfamiliar  
To the blind, unrefined  
But its fine  
My vibration is unfamiliar  
Long road ahead in my progression  
She's a caterpillar  
but I'm iller  
Descendant of those that stood upon holy ground  
Profound  
Although,  
Been captured, held, suspended then told I was otherwise  
Dissected  
Splendid  
Even in a state of suspension  
Not the Hottentot  
But the hothead  
They shot hot lead and decapitated  
Whole cities, entire towns eviscerated  
And my knees raw from all this bending down  
Gathering all these pieces of me up off the ground  
Curse to this concrete, asphalt  
Been spit upon, barked at, then told my oppression was my fault  
Fighting for freedom but never having it  
Fighting for freedom but never having it  
Fighting for free breakfast and clean water  
A decent life without the slaughter  
Denied my own prosperity  
Yet here I am ever present

To memorialize my legacy

I'm Betty Shabazz with a blazer on and the bang out  
Queen Latifah in the role of Cleo finna bang out  
Sojourner in my truth aint I a woman?  
We got the same mouth  
I'm Harriet – rifle close to my side ready to aim out  
Mahalia when she sang out  
I'm Toni jotting notes down for Tar Baby  
There was all kinds of jigaboos and porch moneys and tar babies  
When I was a baby  
There were bones in noses in cartoons  
I would come to memorize  
I know more HidEE hideE hos than one should know  
And that was all before oatmeal  
At once the product and the pest to be fumigated  
At once the most often copied and the most humiliated  
Overdone and understated

I gotta glow feel  
And it's so real  
That they come in mobs to extinguish it  
Utterly flummoxed, perplexed  
By the fact they can't relinquish it  
All while consuming my Ill Street Blues  
My Go Tell It on the Mountain  
My Purple Rain  
In my most natural state, I soar and I reign  
Pushed to the periphery yet I remain the main  
You gon have to pardon me  
When I started out the disks were really floppy  
Not just icons for save  
I'm from before the stream  
I've seen the pound sign from whence the hashtag came  
We'd play tic tac toe in that frame  
With a receiver to my ear I'd talk until the dialtone came  
I'm showin my age  
My bottom and your bottom nah they not the same  
For my life they'll place on me significant blame  
Furiously fighting  
Only furthering  
To ignite my flame

For it is when I'm at my darkest that I'm my most brilliant light  
So fearful of my fury that they'll shoot me on sight  
Black this magic I inhabit  
Burning bright



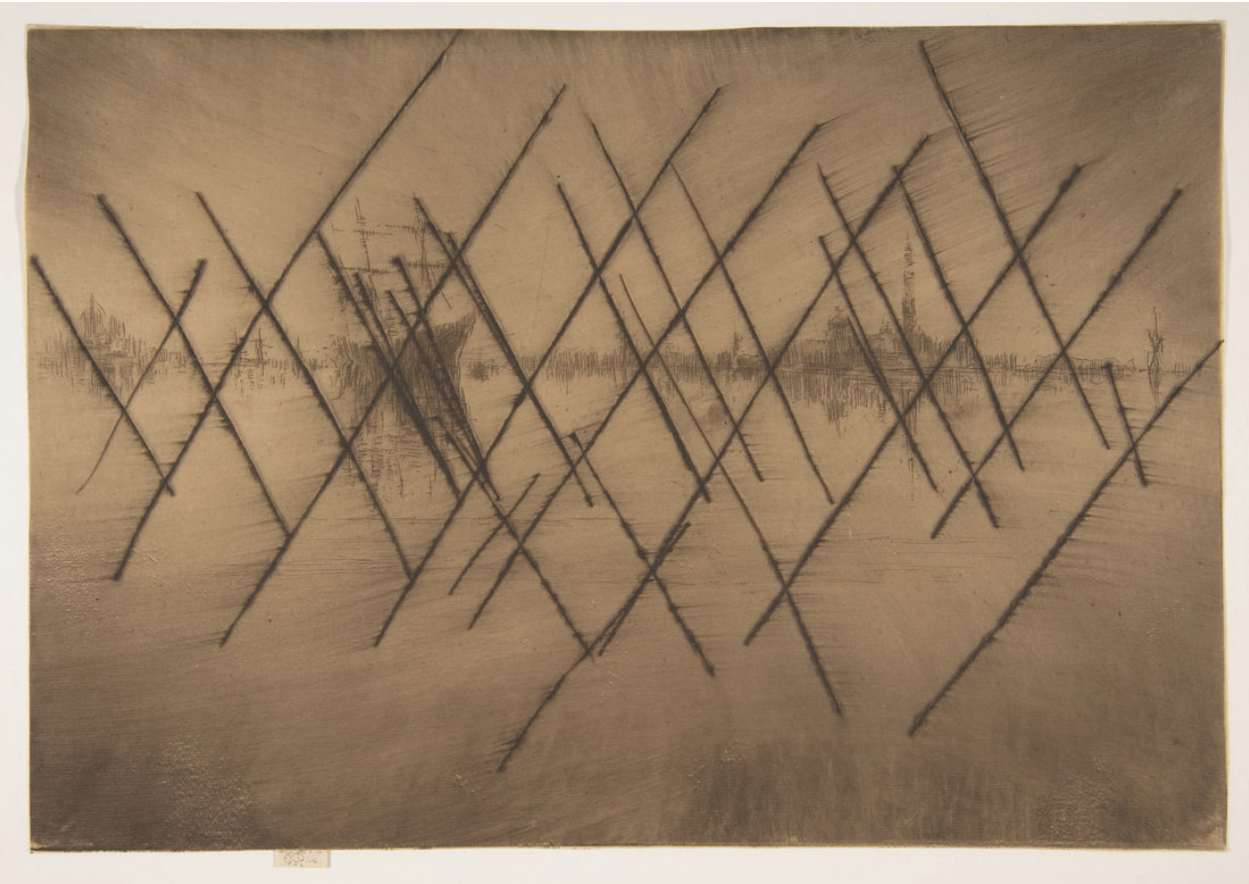
About the Author

Devynity Wray

Devynity Wray is a writer and visual artist from Queens, NY whose work makes the trajectory of the African diasporic heritage, experience and legacy prominent. Ever inquisitive about history and how human ecosystems interact with one another, Wray’s work is an excavation of Blackness steeped in the wealth of knowledge the artist has acquired from her understanding of the Black American experience. Enamored with art at an early age, Wray attended F.H. LaGuardia High School of Music, Art and the Performing Arts where she studied as an art major. As a writer, Wray earned her chops on New York’s slam poetry scene making the Nuyorican Poet’s Café her stomping ground. She was a Nuyorican Poet’s Café Grand Slam Finalist and team member in 2002. Her poem “Black Girl Manifesto” was published in *Letters to a Young Sister* – a bestseller by Hill Harper. She received her BA in Africana, Puerto-Rican and Latino Studies from the City University of New York’s Hunter College and currently attends Lesley University having recently been accepted into their MFA for Visual Arts program.

About the Work

"I wrote "BRIGHT" while in an art incubator with my creative cohort - Mother Mercy. We were charged with creating work grounded in activism and spiritual growth. It is somewhat of a battle cry for me, a call to resist.”



“Nocturn” James McNeill Whistler, Etching and drypoint, printed in dark brown ink on fine laid paper, Plate: 7 7/8 x 1 ½ in., 1879-80. Open source from The Met.

le rêve américain

Jordan Anderson

i want to immolate like antoinette:  
crouching in burnished chamber, fervent, bridal  
while commies storm the gate, howling their debt.

i'd thrash above black waters of cadets,  
manicured fingers brandishing a bible,  
until i drowned like *mon cher* antoinette.

for corrupt policy to circumvent,  
i'd aim beneath pale petticoats a rifle  
at traitors near the gate, wanting dragnet.

mouths forming breadlines *a la* soviet  
(while i'd more shrewdly eat sweet sherry trifle,)  
i want to choke like madam deficit.

in parlor window, adjusting pink aigrette  
i'd take both shaky breath and teary eyeful  
of migrants at the gate, shivering wet.

in ivory tower with sour sobriquet,  
upon a hill as lofty as the eiffel,  
i want to die like marie antoinette  
with neighbors at my neck i've never met.

the tanned hide of an african makes the most enduring and the most  
pliable leather known to man

Jordan Anderson

my skin is not any thicker than yours, i don't think.  
and when i skin my knee at recess in first grade,  
nurse candy shouldn't dub my tears crocodile

and make me indignant. (later on i learn of licorice nibs  
and lacrimal glands.) she is book-learned, and spares her ice pack  
my unflinchingly thick skin of dead-dumb nerves.

my skin wouldn't make very good leather, i don't think, though it isn't my area of expertise  
but i do reckon that had nurse candy decided to dig her acrylics into the aperture of my patella  
and peel, the fruit of the fleshing machine would not have upholstered her swivel chair

any better. my skin is not the scarlet letter of Ham  
my skin is not as the jabuticaba, whose darkening bespeaks  
a pliant willingness to be squashed, my body is not a beast's

but it is in the image of God. and if you washed my feet  
and watched the water warp my cells and prune  
every branch that did not bear fruit, and if you lured

my radial artery to the apex of your lolling tongue  
and expected a cool aurum but were met with the salt of pyrite,  
and if you held up my arm to the sun and fixed your irises on my wrist's radius,

you'd see the sun print of a snake's shed skin, iridophoric glim; glimpse astris as she shimmered  
her variegation up my vellus hairs, ensconced my hand in an evening glove sewn of menelaus'  
left wings--  
and you'd wonder, in all four-hundred-seventy ounces i'd shed, how much of me you'd missed.

**kotatsu**

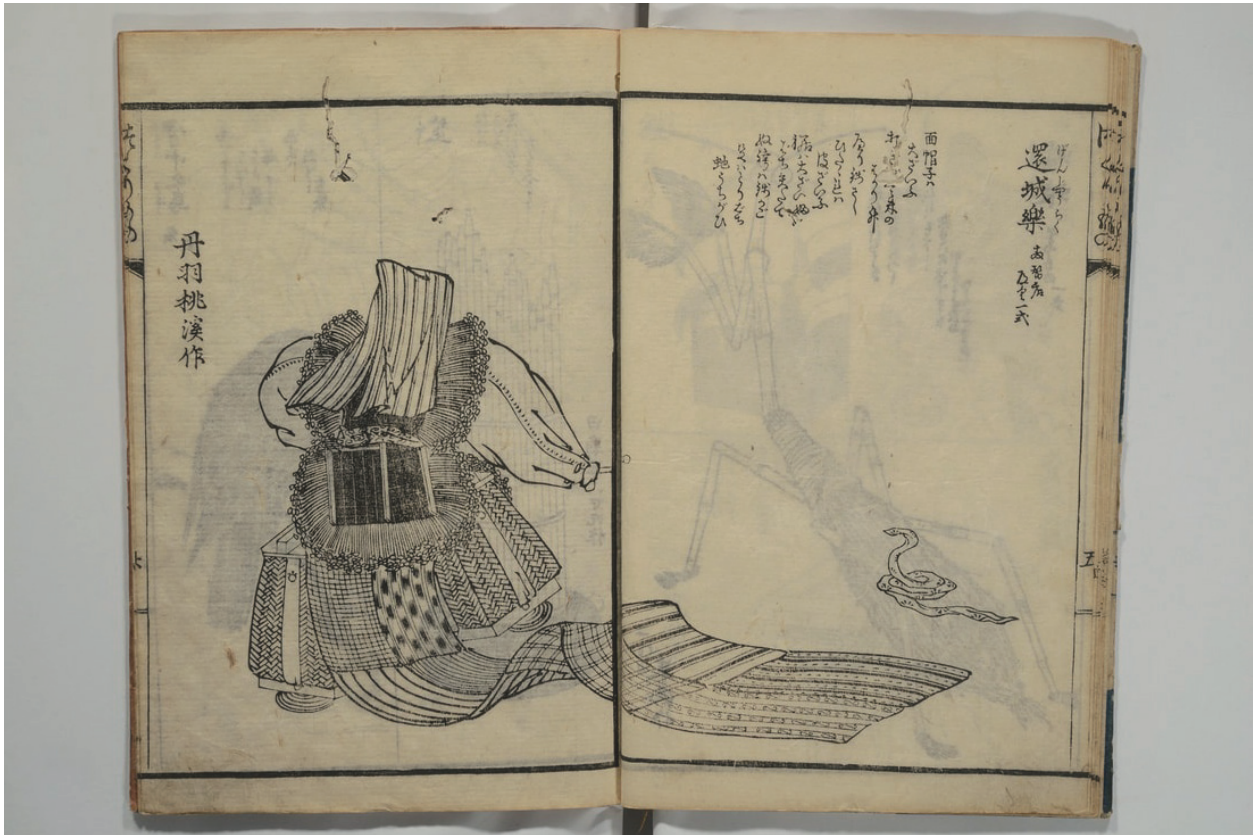
*Jordan Anderson*

in fall i build something to keep me warm:  
ikea table sandwiching patchwork  
of my uncharted fourth. i’m short two parts,

but in the winter i’m more out than in  
and spend my wages huddling from frost  
in hot milk tea and polyester down.

i want you to come by and sit with me--  
but i’m afraid of ten too many volts  
singeing our four legs when they intertwine

in january i keep my goosebumps  
under the covers-- for what’s there to do  
when you must warm the thing meant to heat you?



*“Ideas for Various Things of the Seasons” Hanzan (Matsukawa), woodblock printed books; ink on paper 8 11/16 x 61/8 in., 1837. Open source from The Met.*



**damsel**

*Jordan Anderson*

the prologue is here: if you lopped off the corners of this room, it would be perfect.  
isn't that funny? but seriously, this misplaced moat. crocodiles lick libidinous at my ankles  
and i resolve my flesh to a shrinking bed.

i tell you not to let the bathtub burn. i tell you, with the serosanguinous ink of  
a washable marker, to gerrymander your torment into  
tomorrow.

can i rinse the folds of my brain in this static faucet? or would my consciousness curve into  
an infant's cartilage? is it self-harm if your cerebellum sinks into one dizzy mantra  
foxglove, field mouse, fuckhead.

we set our stage in the stomach of ouroboros. home is a rope pulled through my one ear  
and out the other, making mum the cornfed cluck of morning.  
i walk tightrope,

and leave an ever-stirring wake. tuck tongueless my sinew, two-strand twist of lemon licorice  
teacupped-- if porcelain's not porous, how does it morass so  
cthulhu? i can't clean you up, i read,

bleach and ammonia and pneumonia. my mycophobia coughs a guillotine into a swamp  
sinks to the bottom, diverticulum feter, maybe this is where i die!  
a tabulation of a vicious cycle.

act two is lilliputians. they invade my fleecy afghan and tear from me each miniature pound of  
flesh without  
remorse, making base in a best-barren apparatus. if i were good, i'd prey them back, and eat  
each as  
são gabriel's sauce. raspberry fun dip, babe.

but i am an unshaven coward, and each vellus twitch shakes acrid. i plot general  
a kettle, raise a grocery bag named abjuration in an intimate embrace,  
obviate their almost-fuschia ship,

run on balled feet to the concrete sand and  
obfuscate in waste management my own  
dumb obduration, fight or plight.

sit and cry. americans often get confused sedentary and sedimentary,  
but how much difference is there, really? i swear, lying still i felt  
medusa's gaze on each sole cell, an apoptosis.

the epilogue is this: a girl won't do well. whichever damned damsel's dam lets loose  
the un-serendipitous fallout of her fate has lost: her haloed irises are naught but the  
dented talisman  
of a chisel, gone with the light.

kid gloves

Jordan Anderson

cut paper canvases classroom dyed construction red,  
each zodiac a serrated system of half-organs.

factory standard doll not yet unboxed, inkjet-eyed,  
don’t you take kid scissors to its hair to make it yours?

in the earth’s mantle, i chop off  
your ponytail with a butcher knife,

bring the magma to your face  
so you can see that destruction is natural;

when i take you over, i teach you a new language  
full of holes, a crimson passion that oxidizes into rust

and you don’t forget it. when you open your mouth to foreign tourists  
mars crumbles in your pharynx. you retch.

passion decorates the irises of a fireback  
and stays there— eight thousand meters above, your oculi acuate,

free. there’s a growth beneath your cricoid cartilage  
that you can’t cough up. so, c-section, free. you retch.

nurse needlepoint pricks a scarlet tattoo, i dissipate  
with sunrise rays— tonight, you will dream of nothing but sky.

About the Author

Jordan Anderson

Jordan Elizabeth Anderson is an Afro-Indigenous renaissance girl from Johns Creek, Georgia. A senior in high school, she enjoys designing clothes, reading about philosophy, and occasionally practicing cello. She began seriously writing poetry after a course at Columbia University in the summer of 2020.

About the Work

**le rêve américain:** "One of the central conflicts of my life is that my aesthetics are very bourgeoise, while I myself am a Marxist. So, I admire Marie Antoinette in a stylistic sense but not in a political one...although, this poem is not primarily about the French Revolution. I find the billionaires of today much less stylish, and I tried to elicit in this poem an impression that the elegance suggested by wealth is an incomplete one, something like a façade on a roof; it's built on something less elegant and more urgent."

**the tanned hide of an african makes the most enduring and the most pliable leather known to man:** "This poem is connected to a few of the myths about the black body that arose during the American slave trade. Many of them perpetuate themselves in slightly different ways in the present. Doctors are less likely to prescribe pain medication to black people or believe black women about the extent to which they are experiencing pain; there's still that belief, no matter how subconscious it is now, that our nerves are less equipped to feel pain. I couldn't've recognized them then, but there were certainly moments of racism I experienced in my elementary school. I'd guess this moment with my school nurse was one of them."

**kotatsu:** "I had a sort of crush on this girl at my school when I first moved to New York. At the same time I was building this tiny kotatsu in my room, but I was working as well, and the things I ended up having to buy for a winter of a coldness for which I wasn't really prepared meant that I kept postponing purchasing the heater. A kotatsu is a sort of Japanese coffee table, with a quilt spread out around it and a heater underneath. So, I kept saying I'd invite this girl over to sit underneath it when it was finished, but I never ended up getting to."

**damsel:** "This is probably the most I've written of my traumatic experience, so I think the poem is tired. It's difficult not to cringe at it, because I find it dramatic...the only way I think it might have value is if someone else could find themselves in it."

**kid gloves:** "This poem was inspired by a moment in a book I read, *Slavery Inc.* by Lydia Cacho. She's a journalist uncovering sex trafficking rings all over the world, but there's one moment that really sticks with me in her report, and that's when she describes a girl at a safehouse whose meager English language knowledge is entirely sexual terms. In fact, most of the young girls at this house, at least at the beginning of their stays, act in an archetypically provocative way, because this is how they've been taught to behave as children. I wanted to think about the way these girls were taught, and the society that encouraged it."



*Retrieved from The MET Open Access*

**Some languages need not be translated**

*Michael Hatcher*

Some languages need not be translated.  
When a grown man cries out for his mother  
Or when a woman is ripped from the comfort of this planet  
By the bright sunrise of loud banging  
And wild bullets it sticks with you.  
It rolls over everything like a thick fog.  
Until everyone you love is is jaded  
And covered in smoke.

All of my friends are matches.  
Strike our heads and we will catch fire.  
That is not a threat.  
It is a covenant with the most high.  
It is an obscure passage from a lost holy book,  
Written on the back of our eyelids that reads in case of emergency  
Burn everything!

America has been on fire.  
There are a privileged few who don't want to see it  
But most of us are covered in smoke.  
Last night most of us watched the sky open up.  
It was getting itself ready to receive more black and brown bodies,

There is no natural end to hunting season  
The fear is tangible  
The fear is we will return the gifts that were laid at our door steps  
That are laid at our door step,  
But that is not our way.

There is no race war.  
The only war is a war ion racism,  
And we are armed to the teeth.  
We are an army of everybody,  
An all inclusive wrecking ball.

Please save the explanations and the apologies for the ghost.  
It's too late now, the choir boys have joined the lynch mob.  
In just a few minutes we are going to breathing just fine.  
Deep breaths.

The ability to inhale as much of this country as we want to,  
We've paid for that and then some,

We've seen so many of our family members  
Bleeding on the same side walks  
Our grandparents weren't allowed to walk on.  
"Tired" is not the word.

The word is "now."  
The word is "today."

The revolution will not only be televised  
It will be on demand.  
This is one we can watch over and over

Why should I give my children the "talk?"

Why should I have to tell them to call me if they ever get pulled over?  
It might be our last chance to speak,  
I say no.  
I say no more.

I say there is irony in stolen property  
Being blamed for doing property damage.

Is that all you got?  
What kind of God is worried about bean bags and tear gas?

Hold on George we got this.  
Breonna we got you,  
Tell Ahmaud this aint over.

We are just getting comfortable.  
The good apples are starting to separate themselves from the bad ones.

Tell the sky there is nothing coming tonight or tomorrow  
Some languages don't need to be translated.

My connection to my people has nothing to do with a family tree

So each time a news anchor tells that tragic story,  
That same tragic story,  
I lose something  
I can never get back.

And I want everything back.  
This is not a threat.  
It's a covenant.

About the Author

*Michael Hatcher*

Michael Hatcher is poet, writer, and performer who was raised in Fort Worth, Texas. In 2012 Michael self-published his own chapbook titled "Things I Say in Crowded Rooms." A veteran of poetry slam, he has represented several Dallas and Fort Worth area slam teams four times at the National Poetry Slam. Michael served as slam master on the Inkwell Slam Team for two years. Michael has also performed and facilitated workshops at schools, theaters, libraries, bookstores, bars, and poetry venues across the United States. Michael is a nature lover who enjoys botany and gardening at his home in Austin, Texas.

About the Work

"My writing is my best attempt at bending or altering the boundaries placed on words. From what I’ve gathered about the work at *Inverted Syntax*, that seems to be a common goal amongst some of they artist they feature. I appreciate that."





*“Street Cart” Egon Schiele, Watercolor, gouache, and graphite on paper, 12 3/8 x 18 7/8in., 1914. Open source from The Met.*

## Locusts

*Jonan Pilet*

As Spring comes and Mongolia warms, the wind grows and the dark fog, made of coal and smoke, that covers Ulaanbaatar in the winter, dissipates, and for a moment the Mongol blue sky peers down at the city. Gobi sand moves across plains and steppe, and finally, over and down the hills and into Ulaanbaatar. It flushes through concrete corridors, seeps under doors, clanks against windows, lifts the edges of felt tents, clogs engines, and burns eyes. Animals huddle together, their backs to the wind and their faces buried in each other. Stray dogs run for cover under bushes and parked cars.

And as the sand moves on, it leaves what is left behind trapped in the city along fences, walls, and district corners. Then a new storm, trailing just behind the sand, enters. It’s heard before it’s seen, thundering. The black cloud vibrates as it floods over the hills. Its fist opens and its fingers spread through the districts and down the streets. The Mongolians hide from the storm, and curse it, knowing it means death to their livestock.

But this time Chinese foreigners in the city ran to meet it, out of their apartments and into the streets to collect it. They filled jars and plastic bags with the large-eyed, giant-headed, long-legged creatures. Their kids laughed as the bugs landed on their faces, and mothers bit off heads and put the bodies into their babies’ mouths. The swarm darkened the sky, blocked the sun, and the air, space, and everything in between was filled with chaotic movement.

Gan watched the scene from a sewer hole. He held the lid open a crack and grabbed one of the locusts on the pavement. He held it upside down, its underside revealed, the dark green and brown lines, scaled eyes, transparent wings, oversized mouth, and twitching appendages. He ate it, the head and all, crushing the brittle skeleton and releasing the warm goo and bitter and salty taste onto his tongue.

He called down the hole, but his shouts only echoed back up to him. With no response, he climbed out and joined the others in the streets collecting the locusts.

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“Maybe families are taking the other kids in,” Zorig said last spring, as they collected locusts together. They knew that if they collected enough, they could eat well for weeks.

“We’d see them around the city,” Gan told him. “They’d tell us what happened.”

“Perhaps families outside the city, in the countryside.” Locust legs dangled from the corners of Zorig’s lips as he spoke. “I’ve heard of them taking kids to help care for their livestock. It’s a good life.”

“So many?” Gan used his thumb to stuff more of the bugs into an empty soda bottle. After a few days the locusts that remained would slow; they would stop moving completely. They lived longer by staying motionless. And in the bottle, they’d stay fresh. But for now, they vibrated the plastic with life.

Gan grabbed a locust and held it to Zorig. “What if something’s snatching us up? Just like the locusts?”

“And eating kids?” Zorig laughed. “Maybe we’ll get lucky and be next,” he said, smiling with bug-stained teeth. “I think I’d be tasty,” he patted his stomach, “and filling.”

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Now a year later Gan was one of the few kids left in the sewers. One by one, they had all disappeared. Gan didn’t know where they went, but he was sure they weren’t in Ulaanbaatar anymore. He’d been all over the city and had never seen any of them.

After filling three two-liter bottles with locusts, the sun began to set, and Gan returned to the sewers to sleep on the pile of fabrics and plastic he had collected over the years. This winter had been colder, and this time there was no one to huddle against and fight the cold. In the morning, Gan left his filled bottles and took several more empty ones. It was harder to collect on the second day of the swarm. Most of the locusts had been trampled. The sidewalks and streets were paved in red and green with the flattened insects. Gan looked in less populated areas of the city, to streets with fewer cars, where the bugs congregated on piles of sand in the corners of buildings.

Gan stopped outside his old apartment building where he used to live with his father on the third floor. He looked over the playground and the swing set where he had spent hours with his friends before his father was sent to prison. The collapse of a staircase had been blamed on the architect, his father. Three men had died in the incident. His father was given a life prison sentence on the count of three murders. Gan used to visit the apartment daily, hoping that somehow his father would be released and returned home. But even this place had never truly been Gan’s home.

At the age of two Gan was given to his father as a gift. Gan’s father’s wife had died, and his father’s cousin had given the youngest of his three boys, Gan, as a gift to his grieving cousin. Somewhere in the countryside were Gan’s true parents, parents he never knew and would never meet. But he had been told they never wanted him; that his birth mother had gone insane and had been told by demons to drop him in a river. He disappeared under the freezing rapids and was found further downstream, on the shore, naked, half-frozen and half-dead. But a Lama had found him and woke him.

“A Lama saved you, and he blessed the gift,” his father had told him. “My cousin wasn’t wealthy enough to care for you anyway. Your disposal was a gift to us both.”

Gan often wondered about his birth mother; what kind of spirit would make her drop her son into the water; what the demon told her about him; what words it had whispered. And he wondered how his life went from a curse to be trashed to a gift to be treasured.

As he got older, Gan stopped returning to the apartment. His presence had garnered suspicion and mothers chased him away, throwing stones at him to protect their children. Even now, older and larger, Gan feared being seen and made quick work of the locusts around his old home.

In the next district over, he found more locusts. The half circle created by the apartment buildings had funneled a swarm against the front doors. Another boy had beaten Gan to the spot and was collecting the insects in a small box but as he put them in they jumped out. The boy pushed the box to his chest, trying to keep them from escaping. Gan recognized the boy from the sewers, Tsendyin. They weren't close, but he was one of the few that were left.

Gan moved to help him but stopped as two men came out of the apartment entrance. They carried a large glass jar with a metal cap and spoke to him. They helped Tsendyin move his locusts from the box into the jar and collect more. Gan watched as they filled the large jar and sealed it. They pointed up at the building, and Tsendyin looked up. He was reluctant at first, but then followed them inside. The door closed.

Gan continued around the district collecting, returning a few hours later to the apartment Tsendyin had gone into. Gan went to the door and waited for Tsendyin, snacking on the locusts. But he didn’t come out, and as the sun set, Gan thought maybe he had already left and had gone back to the sewer. So Gan crossed the city to the sewer where Tsendyin spent his nights. But he wasn’t there; instead, he found an older man looking through his things, collecting bits of clothing and fabric from the pile.

“Stop,” Gan said. “Those are Tsendyin’s.”

“It’s dark. And he hasn’t come back,” the man said.

“They’re still his.” Gan ripped the stuff out of his hands and threw it back.

The man spit on the pile. “It’s garbage anyway.” He started to walk away. “If he didn’t come back,” the man said, “he’s not coming back.”

“What do you mean?” Gan asked.

“They don’t come back.” He turned to leave, but Gan grabbed his arm. “Stop,” Gan said.

But the man pushed him off and knocked him to the ground. “Do you know where they go?”

“They’re stolen.”

“Why?”

He tapped his chest and left.

Gan picked through Tsendyin's things, trying to learn something about him from the pile of garbage. Most of the kids had something, something they had left behind, something they had hidden. Over the last year, Gan had started collecting, remembering each child from the items they left behind. Gan saved their items, in case they came back, and if they didn't come back — and not one had — still he kept them safe. He had collected a wooden horse, a rusted knife, a plastic jeweled purse, a ripped and tattered football jersey, a scratched car mirror, a baby doll, a felt sock that smelled of gasoline, a toy train engine, and a necklace with a broken chain. Gan imagined each item had a story and a reason they were treasured, why they were buried and hidden among their things — gifts from parents or siblings, treasured childhood toys that reminded them of warm beds and full stomachs. Gan didn't have a treasure. There was nothing left of his time before the sewers.

Beneath the pile of trash Tsendyin slept on, Gan found a photo wrapped in a plastic bag. The edges were torn, and water had warped the image, but Gan could recognize a young Tsendyin standing next to two other larger boys, each a little like Tsendyin, their nostrils wide and their ears long. He smiled as he looked at the picture and traced the shapes with his fingers.

He flipped it over. Words were written on the back, but Gan couldn't read. He yelled for the man, hoping he could read, but he was gone. Gan decided to wait for Tsendyin and ask him what the words meant. But as Tsendyin didn't return, Gan grew impatient. He put the photo in his pocket, grabbed one of his bottles of locusts, ran to the nearest manhole, and climbed out.

People on the street cursed at him as he ran back down the dark streets, past his old home, to the apartment where Tsendyin had been led. Gan tried to remember what the men had looked like as he waited outside the building. All he could remember is that they weren't Mongolian, they were foreigners. Gan had heard about foreigners bringing homeless kids into their apartments, feeding them, and telling them stories of foreign spirits and demons and their powers over the world.

He moved from hiding spot to hiding spot, trying to make sure no one would become suspicious of him and make him leave. Stray dogs came over to him, sniffed him, and begged for food. He gave them a few locusts from his bottle and told them to leave, kicking at them. Sometime in the early morning, when Gan started to fall asleep, he heard the apartment door close. He peered across the street to where a man jogged out of the apartment. He recognized him as one of the two foreign men. But Tsendyin wasn't with him. Gan thought about following him but didn't want to risk missing Tsendyin leaving while he was gone. He stayed, and a short while later the man returned in a large Russian truck with a canvas covered back. He parked the truck next to the door and reentered the apartment. Gan moved across the dark pavement closer, as close as he was willing to risk, ducking behind a bench as the apartment door reopened and both men came out, struggling as they pushed a large wooden box on a dolly. Gan took shallow breaths and knelt close to the ground as the men scanned the apartments and then lifted the box into the back of the truck. One of the men cursed as they pushed the box further into the covered back. The other man scolded the first in a foreign language.

They lifted the back latch, tied up the canvas, and got into the cabin. Gan looked up at the

apartment building as the truck started. He wondered if maybe Tsendyin had already left. Maybe he was still in there, or he was wherever these men were heading.

The truck rolled forward, and Gan ran towards it, jumping onto the back and holding onto the canvas. He pushed his bottle of locusts through the cover, untied the rope as the truck moved, and climbed inside as it turned onto a lit street. He tied the ropes and sealed the canvas behind him.

Gan crawled into the dark, feeling the truck bed on his hands and knees until the truck suddenly stopped. He was tossed forward and his head slammed into the wooden box.

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When Gan woke up the sun was shining in sharp rays through holes in the canvas above. The air was stiff and hot, and a locust climbed on his face, rubbing its back legs against his nose. He sat up slowly, and the locust jumped to the truck bed. Gan felt nauseous. His throat was parched, his head pounded, and he wanted water, but he only had his bottle of locusts. He crawled to it and took out several bugs and chewed them slowly. He closed his eyes and let the snack settle his stomach.

He sat next to the wooden box. It felt cold, so Gan rested his head against the wood. He realized it was freezing, its coolness coming through the wood. He pushed himself up and struggled to balance as the truck bounced.

The top of the box was latched and tied shut. Gan tried to untie the knot, but it was too tight, and he couldn't pry it loose. He looked around for something to help open the box. He dug through piles of empty cardboard boxes and rolls of plastic wrapping until he found a glass bottle. He broke it on the truck bed, shattering it to pieces. He carefully took one of the glass shards and used it to cut at the rope. Slowly the rope frayed and as Gan got more impatient, he cut and pressed harder. The glass dug into his palm and blood dripped onto the truck bed. With a final swipe of the glass against the rope, it severed. Gan dropped the piece of glass and held his bloody hand in a fist as he unlatched the box and pushed the lid up.

The box was filled with ice. Gan dug, the blood from his hand mixing with the ice and turning it pink. He reached something solid just below the top layer and wrapped in plastic was Tsendyin. Gan recognized his shape, curled tight, his head and neck bent unnaturally to fit in the box. Tsendyin's skin was blue, and he seemed to have shrunk.

Gan dug more, moving the ice to the edges.

"Tsendyin," Gan whispered. He ripped and tore the plastic off of his face, and touched him, recoiling at his wet and oily skin, beads of liquid resting on him like dew. He tried to lift him, but some of the ice had attached to the plastic around Tsendyin and made him too heavy. Gan twisted Tsendyin and faced his body upwards. He put his ear to his chest and listened for a heartbeat. It

took time for Gan to tune everything else out and hear the thick thuds, his own or Tsendyin's he didn't know, but he hoped it wasn't his.

"You're a gift, Tsendyin," Gan said. "You're alive. You have to be alive." The truck came to a sudden halt and Gan fell back down, sliding back along the floor. He protected his head as he hit the cabin with a loud thud.

The cabin doors opened and closed as the two men exited the vehicle.

Gan jumped up and closed the box's lid and redid the latch, working to make it look like it had never been opened as the men came around the truck. As they started to untie the canvas, he hoped they wouldn't notice the red bloodstains on the wood and the rope. Gan pressed his back to the box and slid down as the canvas opened and the bright sunlight flooded in. He closed his eyes as the men exchanged words and the canvas was closed again. Gan listened as the men undid their belts and liquid hit parched earth. Then the men got back into the cabin and the truck moved again.

Gan could escape now, before the truck was moving too fast. He could make it back to the capital. He would be safe, even if Tsendyin wasn't. He could warn what few kids were left about the ice box. He could tell them that demons had taken the children, demons with foreign tongues. That they snatched them up and took them far away. It could be too late for Tsendyin. But it wasn't too late for Gan. He moved away from the box and peeked out through the canvas. There wasn't a road. Behind them the truck kicked up dust, and through the brown haze, Gan saw sharp rock faces jutting from the edges of hills. But there were no people. No one to shout to for help. No one to signal. There was only Tsendyin frozen in the box. Gan felt in his pocket for the photo. He took it out and flipped it over to the words on the back. He moved his fingers along the letters.

Gan removed the lid again, digging the ice out of the box and into the truck bed. He knew if the men stopped again and looked, they'd know he was here, and he would end up in the box with Tsendyin. But he had made up his mind. They would both escape, and Tsendyin would tell him what the words said and what they meant. Gan pulled at the plastic and chipped away at the ice attached to Tsendyin's legs and pulled him out of the box and onto the truck bed. His body was stiff and held its huddled shape.

"Wake up, Tsendyin," Gan said. He slapped his face gently. "Please, wake up." The boy's body didn't move. Gan again placed his ear to his bare chest. The thuds were fainter but quicker than before, if they were there.

Gan dragged him to the back of the truck and untied the canvas. He opened it, tying the canvas to either side and letting the sun hit Tsendyin. He glistened in the light, the cold water running off him like sweat. The sky was bluer here. Gan had never seen it like this in the city. And there wasn't a cloud in sight. They seemed to be leaving the hills behind; the land smoothed and flattened. The earth behind them was cut in two by the trail the truck had made. Gan leaned out the back and looked in both directions. The flat nothing spread out in every direction, and Gan wondered where these men were taking them. Perhaps they were demons taking them out of the

world, off the edge.

This was the farthest Gan had ever been from the city since he was a child, and he had no idea how far that had been. "My family could be from out here," he told Tsendyin.

The sun moved across the sky above them. Gan kept Tsendyin and the bottle of locusts in the light. The heat brought the locusts to life and the bottle shook, but Tsendyin stayed still, his body motionless. Gan didn't understand why the heat wouldn't wake him.

"They're going to stop again soon," Gan said. "I need you to wake up. We'll jump out of here. We'll find people. We'll work for them. Or we'll make it back to the city. We'll eat well, and we'll survive. You only need to wake up."

Gan collected ice, held some to his cut hand, and wrapped more in plastic. He left it in the sun and let the ice melt and drank from the pooled water. He thought about forcing Tsendyin to drink as well, but he worried about him choking. Gan snacked on his locusts. They flew and hopped, and the bottle shook, but Tsendyin was still limp.

The sun was getting low. Gan felt Tsendyin. His skin was moist and slick, and he was still cool. Gan took ice and held it to his own head as it throbbed. "Tsendyin, they will stop soon. The sun is setting, and they have been driving for hours."

The truck slowed and Gan feared it was too late to escape. He reached for the canvas but stopped as he looked down. The dirt on the ground had turned to small stones. The truck slowed more and lurched forward with a splash. Running water covered the stones and the back tires as they entered a river.

The water rose swiftly, nearly to the truck bed, and Gan wondered whether the water would flood in, or the truck would stop. But it pushed forward through the river.

"This is our chance," Gan said. He reached into the water and splashed it onto Tsendyin. But the boy didn't move. He stood up, put his hands under Tsendyin's arms, and held his bottle of locusts in his armpit. Then he dragged him to the edge of the truck bed and fell back into the water, pulling Tsendyin with him. The water was swifter than Gan had expected. It pulled his legs from under him, and even in four feet of water Gan was dragged down. The locust bottle popped out of his arm and floated down the stream, but Gan refused to let go of Tsendyin. He tried to get their heads above the water, pushing off the river bottom, but the rocks under his feet gave way and he slipped. The river rolled and twisted him and dragged him down. Gan hit the river bed and lost Tsendyin.

Without Tsendyin he was able to get his own head above the water. He kicked repeatedly at the rocks below to keep himself up. Above the surface he could see the truck, now far behind, pulling out of the river and continuing forward. But Tsendyin wasn't anywhere. He was still somewhere under the water. Gan yelled for him, but his words were swallowed by the river.

He pushed off the ground and climbed to the edge of the water and watched for Tsendyin. But he

didn’t resurface. Further down the river, the setting sun reflected off of the bottle of locusts, and up and across the river the truck moved further and further away.

Gan climbed out of the river and ran downstream following the bottle of locusts. “You’re a gift, Tsendyin!” he yelled. He yelled again between fits of coughing. He kept running and kept looking over the surface of the river. The truck disappeared into the distance and he was losing the bottle, the river flowing faster than he could run, and growing deeper downstream. It got darker and the landscape turned orange. The river reflected the harsh light and Gan squinted as he searched for Tsendyin. Twice he reentered the river nearly drowning as he chased what turned out to be nothing but glare. The sun set and Gan moved out of the water and collapsed on the shore, shivering as the hot day turned into a cold night. Gan took the photo out of his pocket and unfolded it. “What does it say?” he asked. The words on the back of the photo had smeared even more, and the photo was splitting where it had been folded. Gan was losing all he had left of Tsendyin. “What does it say?” he yelled.

This time there was no one to save him, no Lama to guide him back into the world. He set the photo in the river and let it float away.

Gan laid down and watched the stars move above him, brighter than he’d ever seen, and closer too. He rolled over and curled into a ball, shaking. Two stars across the river moved together, their light growing brighter and closer.

“The truck,” Gan said. “The demons.” The truck lights turned and started along the riverbank, following the opposite shore towards him. He pushed himself off the ground and waded into the river. “Sorry, Tsendyin,” he said as he got deeper. “Sorry, Zorig.” He thought about the things each one left behind as he moved into the river. “Od, Chimeg, Yul, Tab, Suhk, Chinua, Otgun.” He named more of the sewer kids as he lost sight of the stars, slipped under the water, and was taken away by the river.

## About the Author

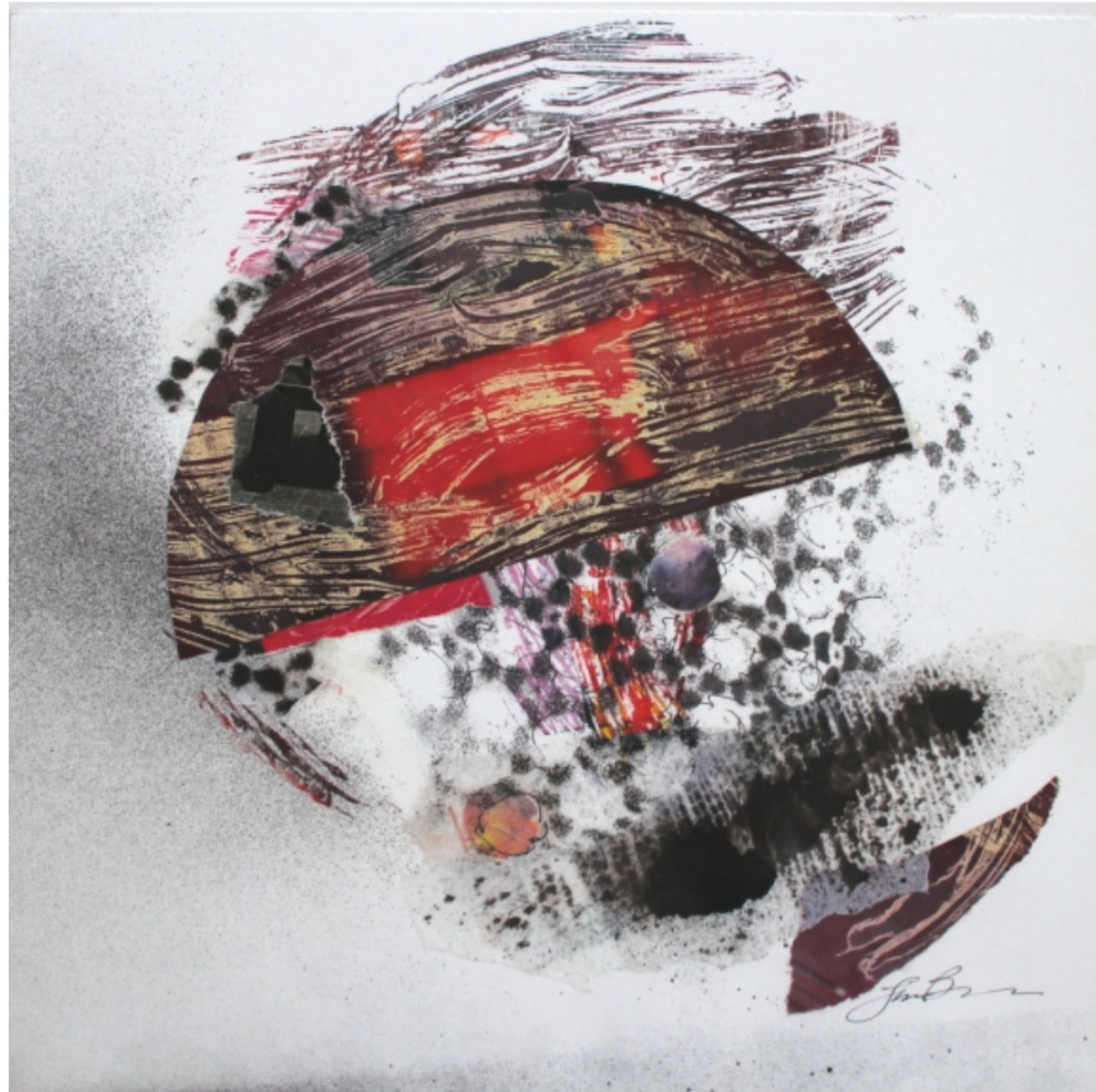
*Jonan Pilet*

Jonan Pilet studied Creative Writing at Houghton College, the University of Oxford, and received his Master of Fine Arts at Seattle Pacific University. His debut short story collection “Nomad, Nomad” is being released on March 1st, 2021. For more on his work, please visit his [website](#).

## About the Work

Pilet wrote "Locusts" when revisiting his childhood home of Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia in the summer of 2019. He noticed that the children that had lived in the sewers were no longer around the city. So he asked around to try to figure out what had happened. "Locusts" is based on the stories he was told.





“Untitled #10” Lisa Berley, mixed media, 12 x 12 in., 2010.

## From *meconium*

Danielle Ferrara

Only when the door appears do floors mutate.

At first there

were only the windows, changing landscapes so that I  
would not remember any of them.

Despite my dreams I had felt  
safe.

Many die from overwhelm, I thought.

Her eyes are lost as moon. I say, *Your skin*. The words fall like  
leaf. I dream of invisible objects pulling

pores apart. Her  
fingers crook. *It is for you*. Did the stolen collapse, or was  
it destroyed? There is the heart of wood

ready to burn and warm me. I am  
reminded of

landscapes that change so fast  
I  
cannot remember  
them

I decide to  
stay

I am among graves. I can no  
longer hear her  
voice. Would if I were

a voice she could hear. Each day begins to

feel less real, duller. I know her memories fill me  
when I

sleep. When I  
finally begin

to wander among roots,  
loss feels

conceivable. Mouths and cheeks fill with salt. I take that which  
is not fruit and bury

it in soil.  
Absence is itself.

The future colors space, it is hardly a way.  
A rocking of a body is a symbol. All is smoke, each  
mistake, pasts woven of scaled rot. The math  
disappears.

Among others, it is a fragment, a world. The foot swerves out

of  
the road. The water sends heat  
into mist. She thinks she is  
complete orbiting back, but more likely the orbit is gone.

In dreams she may have warmed a spot  
with contact but no longer does  
she sleep.

She cries over dust as it breaks in her

fingers and smokes as ash. She drifts in a library of the mind,  
unable to sit,

a plateau of the wind has seeped out, past, or  
beyond.

Someone stares at her with their watch.  
She opens a  
book, cannot read, mask too wide. A fairy

tale, and she bloated. Poem a foot. Poem an  
ear, poem daemon, poem a flame. And we'll play together.

And we'll see each other. That's how far we've gone

And she laughs back. And the  
morphing  
a freeze. A watching. A sentencing,

ability.  
Watch it grow

this elemental cartoon.

**From *matherial***

*Danielle Ferrara*

gull flowers  
ful fae  
la rein e  
men fa  
quen fa  
fe fe  
la rein

**About the Author**

*Danielle Ferrara*

Dani Ferrara (co-founder, Nocturne School of Lucid Writing) is a student of the self-healing imaginal. From quantum philosophy to trance, shadow and sound, her poetics embrace the experimental and eclectic. She received her MFA in Creative Writing and Poetics from Naropa University. Her work has been featured in Black Sun Lit’s *\*Vestiges\**, Dream Pop Press, and ARTEIDOLIA’s swifts & slows, among others.

**About the Work**

"Like much of my work, these poems are fragments of false memories. Hoping to break up my brain's own memories and make room for the new, I surrender to their sound and feeling."





*Textile Design with Alternating Vertical Garland of Stylized Leaves and Undulating Circles Surrounded by Pearls, 4 3/16 x 4 3/16 in., 1840. Open source from The Met.*

## **Stable**

*Mary-Pat Buss*

The cast-making room was dismal. Its floor was covered in an off-color linoleum that screamed of frequent use and hasty cleanings. I stared at a square below me where someone had missed a bit of plaster. The flooring looked like it had sprung a growth where one tiny white clump had escaped the staff's notice. It glared up at me. How could the staff have missed cleaning it? *Say something!* It challenged me. I glanced away.

A nurse tugged at the tight nylon tube I was wearing for my scoliosis brace fitting and wiggled it into place. The movement jolted me out of my trance, and I numbly raised my arms as she strapped me into the apparatus designed to hold my limbs up while the mold dried. She glanced over my body and nodded, a gesture akin to checking an item off a list, and stepped away to direct a spotlight at my form.

I craned my neck once the nurse left to look at my mother. She was sitting in an office chair nearby. She smiled in encouragement and I tried to smile back. I settled for a twitching of my lips. We waited.

The cast maker swooped into the room, and I tried to look anywhere but at him while he hastily covered my body in wet plaster strips. Then, as abruptly as he entered, he left and I stood spread-eagle hooked to the support device. No one spoke. I was not allowed to move. I waited for the strips to dry, waited for the cast mold to be cut off me, waited for permission to leave, and waited for news that yes, the curve in my spine had stopped progressing. I allowed myself to drift into space, floating into places where physical limitations imposed by rotating spines did not exist.

I had learned my Cobb Angle that morning. Orthopaedic doctors use Cobb Angles to help determine the degree of spinal curvatures; they draw lines pointing away from each of the most tilted vertebrae until they meet in the middle. "Severe" is considered 40 degrees. Mine was 45. If the cast didn't work, I was going to have surgery.

I had stood before my doctor with my hospital gown open in the back and my feet planted facing forward. It was cold. Mom had told me to wear my good underwear before we left home, and as the doctor felt along my hips and lower spine, I ignored his touch.

He poked his head around my torso to speak to my mother. I looked down at the top of his bald scalp blanketed in age spots. He didn't ignore me; he seemed to know I was not the kind of kid that passively lets adults make choices. He met my eyes when he suggested a brace. My back was still exposed and I could feel his index finger nudge the furthest part of my spine. It was his way of telling me how far off course it was. I nodded. A couple of months prior, my hips and shoulders had become noticeably uneven. I wondered to myself how the kids at school would react to the brace.

The doctor gave me permission to cover up, and my mother preserved my modesty by tying the



top of my gown while she asked if the brace would fit under loose clothes. Yes. It was adjustable. It could be removed eight hours each day.

“So she can take it off at school?” The world started to spin again with my mother’s question.

“Absolutely.”

She smiled and I grinned hesitantly.

My mother had been optimistic. The scenario was laid out to me: the curve would stop progressing, the brace would be comfortable, no one would notice the twist in my back. She was making the decisions for both my father and herself while swallowing her own worries. Her child had lost an inch worth of height in a year. She knew that what she decided would impact the rest of my life, and if it weren’t for the high-pitched tone in her voice, I would never have known the pressure she felt. She must have thought that if she sounded enthusiastic, I would feel enthusiastic too.

I wanted to scratch a drip of plaster inching down my leg and instead forced my heart to go to old things now lost. The feeling of running, before my rib cage twisted and threw my balance off kilter. My feet hitting the pavement and my lungs filling fully. My muscles stretching and the burn as they carried me faster and faster.

My mother’s voice pierced through the fog. “Do you want me to buy you some razors, honey?” I startled as embarrassment burned my fantasies to a crisp.

“You don’t need to be embarrassed. But there is hair under your arms.”

I didn’t need to be told I was blushing. A male nurse shuffled a few papers and escaped on an errand. “You’re twelve and it’s normal for young girls to start shaving.”

I tried to allow my mind to disconnect again. I had shaved before, but I wouldn’t start thinking of doing those things every day until a few years later, and I would be lying if I did not say I felt a little betrayed that my mother brought this up when there was nothing I could do about it. The stress of the situation must have put a crack in her usually reliable filter.

“Think of the brace like being waxed.” She wheezed out a laugh. That's what happens when she gets really tickled.

Twelve and embarrassed by the world! I lowered my eyes back to the blob of plaster. I determined that once I was free, and clothed, I’d kick it loose and toss it. The next girl didn’t need to see it.

\* \* \*

My childhood friend and I played in her backyard. We were six at most, and she was trying to master a forward flip. There was a weird charge to the atmosphere, the sky an overcast grey-blue, and it would rain soon, so we were rushing. Electrified by the currents in the air, she took a running start before she jumped into a handspring and her shoulder length hair flew in a mad halo about her head. She landed on her feet.

“You had it!” I cried out in joy. I was terrible at gymnastics. My mother had enrolled me in a class when I was little and the trainer decided not to teach me. Back then, I thought it was because I ran on the balance beam, but I later learned it was because my back was not straight and she didn’t want the liability. Of course, I was a stubborn child and completely unfazed. I tried to do flips anyway.

“Let me see if I can do it!” She looked at me doubtfully. My kind of athletic was sturdier than hers. I was a pro at t-ball and I loved to run in short spurts. When my friends needed someone strong, they asked me. I wasn’t slender like her with tiny arms like sticks. She loved to dance, dress up, and be called pretty. I was my brother’s baseball team sidekick, a tomboy missing a few teeth, and my nose was covered in freckles. My nickname was even Impy and I served it well: short, stocky, and temperamental.

She grinned to me in encouragement as I mimicked her starting pose. Arms stretched above me, I leaned and began to run. I knew I had to gain momentum. I closed my eyes and propelled into the flip. I could feel when I reached halfway. My hands gripped the soft earth, but I’d twisted in midair. I landed in a roll off and came to a stop in a seated position.

“Go straight next time, and you’ll have it.”

We spent the next half hour trying to flip together. She landed on her feet with every attempt. By the time the first strike of lightning laced along the clouds above us, I was getting better, but I kept twisting to the left. I didn’t know why. I kicked the dirt and pouted.

“You’ll get better at it.” She had a way of forestalling my tantrums. My notorious temper evaporated.

The first drop of rain fell and we raced to the back patio door. I won because she let me.

\* \* \*

As I came out of the anaesthesia, I felt weighed down, heavy, and wrong. The steady beep of a heart monitor pushed its way into my senses, my lips were chapped, and my jaw shook. The world hurt.

I had been told that I would wake up in some “discomfort.” There would be nurses to take care of me and I might feel strange. The surgeon had put Harrington Rods in my back to straighten

my now seventy-eight degree curve, fused my thoracic vertebrae, and readjusted my rib cage.

There is a difference between knowing and feeling. I could feel the rods, foreign and unyielding.

A familiar voice asked, “Mary-Pat. Are you awake? I told your mother to get some rest in the waiting room. She’s been here for hours and I figured she needed to relax, but I can go get her.”

A squeal sounded from one of the machines that managed my vitals. It was an alarm.

“Mary-Pat. Breathe.” The buzzer blared over her calm directions.

I recognized the voice as my aunt’s. The revelation that I was not breathing surprised me. I focused through the fog of beeps and high-pitched ringing, and I gasped in a hasty burst of oxygen. Suddenly, the sounds stopped except for the wailing of a child in a bed near me. My aunt asked a nurse, “Why isn’t she breathing on her own?”

“The doctor moved her ribcage. She will have to relearn some things.”

“Like breathing.” It was a simple statement.

“Please, get her mother from the waiting room.” Aunt Cindy squeezed my hand as she gave orders to the nurse.

A few moments later the alarm went off again and my aunt directed her attention back to me. She grasped my hand, and I knew she would act as an anchor until the wrongness faded.

“Mary-Pat. Breathe.”

\* \* \*

It was the spring before my first surgery. I was 13, and my mother wanted to wait until school ended and after I visited my father. Mom was double-booked between my brother’s track meet and my softball tryouts, so she dropped me off. I sat in the dugout with a few friends waiting for my name to be called.

It had started to be hard for me to stand up straight and get a good breath of air into my lungs. If my mother had known, she would never have let me try out, but be damned if I didn’t love softball. I could swing a bat like a demon. My mother had told me that I probably wouldn’t be able to play ever again after the surgery.

When I stepped up to the plate, there were snickers from girls I did not know. It was dark, the lights were blinding, and someone’s tired-looking father ran the pitching machine. The jeering

started from the outfield. “Hunchback!” and “Weirdo!”

I looked at the dad and he looked back, frowning. I took the batting position my father had taught me, crouch low, weight on your back leg so you are ready to run. Lift the bat high. Swing like there is no tomorrow.

“That’s not a real stance!” Some kid behind me shouted, but something in my expression must have registered because the dad told the kids to stop their yelling. His eyes spoke pity, blue and sad.

Most of the kids at school knew something was up with my back, but until that moment, I had been able to separate my spine from the rest of my life. That countenance of sadness and expectation of failure made me feel a hate I had yet to know.

I locked eyes with him and nodded.

When the ball flew, I swung. A satisfying crack registered in my ears as its yellow dimpled surface connected with the bat and flew right back at those pitying eyes. The father ducked just before it hit him, and the outfield paused in surprise as the ball passed.

You don’t run the bases at tryouts, so I stood still. People whispered in the stands behind me and my friends cheered.

The ball was back at the pitcher’s mound and that same poor dad looked back at me.

“Outfield, move back!” I’d be lying if I said I didn’t smile.

A strange feeling comes over moments when some god given grace has selected you from the masses and allowed you *this one moment*. I felt it flood into me as the ball was loaded into the machine.

This time I did not aim at the dad. I hit the ball and he jumped as I launched it straight back into the machine. It flew back out, and I punted a grounder. It skipped along the dirt, passing the surprised shortstop, and I walked back to the dugout.

\* \* \*

I underwent my second surgery seven years later. After the procedure, the hospital felt sterile and alien, and a sharpness of sensation coursed along my skin. The sheets on my body felt stiff. My mother and father stood at opposite sides of my hospital bed, each holding one of my hands, faces drawn and worried. I was gritting my teeth and holding my parent’s fingers with hands that belonged to someone else. Cramped. Pale.

This doctor was young and ambitious. In a twelve-hour surgery meant to last four, he’d found

himself overwhelmed. My surgery at thirteen had failed at correcting my spine, and he expected he would understand more once he opened my back. He discovered that the rearranged vertebra hadn't fused. Only the rods stopped my back from collapsing. My ribs were permanently in a rotated position. My L5 vertebrae had slipped and fractured, and the pain that caused me to submit to seeing a doctor originated from the disks dying around it. He later told me he'd had no idea and refused to operate on me again. I was beyond his skill set.

The anaesthesia had started to wear off, and I released my mother's hand long enough to push the morphine button device. The pain stayed. My father had to leave the room; his frustration with my condition overpowering. He paced the halls. My mother remained by my bedside. I remember baring my teeth like an animal in a documentary. My body moved in uncontrolled spasms and spurts. I growled and shrieked.

Later, the nurses strapped me to the bed.

I imagined figures moving in and out of the room. Grey blue shapes and shadows passed and returned, paused. I lost count of the number of times I pushed the button. At one point, I heard a strange keening and realized it was me.

A tree grew. I watched the roots take shape and wrap themselves around their brown brothers, weaving into a trunk with no beginning and end. Leaves sprouted in crayon colors, jungle green vines and tangerine foliage, a hot house of tropical plant life joined by sudden birds and strange furry beasts.

Kim, my best friend, came to see me with her husband, Justin. He removed her when she started to cry. Outside the walls of my hospital cell I heard her sobbing,

My mother's angry voice reached through my half-sleep. The room was empty except for my grandfather in the corner; his dentures had come unglued and his eyes were closed. She shouted that she wanted a new nurse. She wanted the doctor who performed my surgery.

I pushed the button again and again.

An older woman walked through a vine hanging from a tree branch above her, her face shadowed. My legs twitched involuntarily. An unanticipated scream ripped from my chest. I perceived that I annoyed the woman and hoped it wouldn't hurt the level of care she gave me.

She was the floor manager, and she avoided looking at me or my mother as she checked my vitals. Her lips were pursed as if she considered this inspection unnecessary. She examined my IV. She rolled me onto my side, and through waves of nausea I felt her poking my staples. She returned me to my back in a movement nurses call a log roll.

I pushed and pushed and pushed the button.

She watched my thumb and ran her fingers along the IV. "The machine says that you asked for pain medication one hundred and forty-four times over the night."

I never forgot that number.

I closed my eyes. The tubes connected to my body swayed and swished like vines. Suddenly, her movement stopped. I could hear her breathing, but she didn't come out from behind.

"Excuse me." She adjusted something and exited. My mother collapsed into a chair.

An older man stood over me. A bird landed on his shoulder. He was explaining to my mother that there had been a mistake. My morphine feed had not been hooked up properly. A day and a half had passed and no medication had reached me.

He turned his eyes on me, strange grey orbs framed in lines. He evaluated the numbers on my vitals monitor and he delivered a nondescript platitude. When he turned away, he spoke to my mother.

"Please, let us know if you would like to speak to a lawyer." The bird that rested on his shoulder spread its wings and took flight, landing on one of the main branches of the trunk. His wings flexed and settled. Lavender and plum. Dandelion yellow. Red Orange.

I pushed the button and a smooth weight swelled into my limbs. My chest filled with air, lungs inflating. The metal in my back warmed. Sixteen screws, the rods, and the incisions began to fade into the distance.

I woke up to my mother and father standing by my bedside. The restraints around my wrists were gone. My mother, the warrior who fought for me. My father, the man who felt my pain.

The jungle receded.

\* \* \*

"Flat back" is the term used to describe what happens when the spine is supposed to heal in a small curve in the lower back called a lordosis that allows you to stand up straight, but instead, it flattens and leaves you pitched forward. This puts stress on the hips and back and causes debilitating pain. Within a year, I developed flat back and needed my third surgery.

It involved a surgeon I didn't like who offered the least invasive approach. He removed a wedge of bone from my spine, tilted my torso back, and fused it all together with grafts. I was resentful that I had to miss another semester of college and put my life on hold again and I had anxiety from the days without morphine from the previous surgery. My goal was to get out of the hospital fast.

Nurses give their patients hurdles to pass before they are allowed to go home: eat solid food,

walk the length of a hallway, sit for an hour, take yourself to the bathroom and back. My day’s goal was to spend thirty minutes upright in an armchair and I was somewhere around minute ten, coasting in a haze of willpower and refusal to resign, when Kim and Justin arrived.

My fingers’ vice-like grip meant I didn’t need to tell them my goal was a struggle. They helped me laugh about it, inventing a new meaning to the term “armchair warrior.” We were in a hospital together again. My back was being dysfunctional again. Some nurse was going to make me drink prune juice again.

Kim hated hospitals more than me. OCD was an unwavering force in her life, and hospitals were germ ridden castles. It was a testament to her love that she’d come.

When the nurse arrived and told me I could lay down, I felt relieved. She also told Kim to help me pee first. Kim froze. I barked a wild morphine cackle, and Justin helped me stand while he held my IV tubes.

“Is my butt hanging out?”

“Yep.”

“Awesome.”

“I’m going to try and do this on my own,” I said.

Kim visibly relaxed; Justin looked doubtful. I made it through most of the bathroom trip fine until I stood up, flushed, and had no idea how to pull up my underwear. Still, I had almost managed to finagle the hospital panties up around my hips when I knocked a roll of toilet paper into the bowl.

I called out to Kim, embarrassed. I couldn’t bend to reach it, and what would I say? That I had just left it? I had too much pride to ask for the staff’s help and besides, what are friends for?

Wide coffee eyes peered around the bathroom door. Kim’s face was some kind of cross between amusement and terror as she breached the threshold.

I pointed at the floating toilet paper roll.

“... Oh dear.”

She stared. I stared. She hiccupped.

“Everything okay?” Justin called from outside. We didn’t ask him to deal with it, either. Our mutual refusal to depend on anyone except each other united us.

A moment passed, and Kim exclaimed in triumph as she all but skipped out of the bathroom. I heard her opening the built-in cabinets. When she returned, she held a bent wire hanger and her

eyes were sparkling.

We further contorted the hanger together. She poked at the soaked roll, balanced it on the hanger, and skittered over to the trash can. It landed with a thud.

We emerged laughing with tears in our eyes. Justin blinked, bemused, and supported me as I maneuvered my way back to bed.

\* \* \*

After a sixth spine surgery, I went out with friends, finished my undergraduate degree, traveled, and got married. At my wedding, despite the protests from my mother, aunt, Kim, and future spouse, I insisted on wearing towering red heels. I tripped during the first dance, and my husband pretended to dip me. My clumsiness got a round of applause, though I glimpsed Kim and Justin laughing uncontrollably. My mother and father cheered.

The doctor that performed my final three procedures told me most people with my condition were permanently disabled. He was surprised that I worked and had even attended dance classes. My refusal to submit was the key to my mobility, and I knew it.

My job hurt, though. I taught high school and was on my feet most of the day. I would have to sit in a chair and shift my hips between classes until a grinding noise and sliding sensation signaled that my sacrum was back in the joint. Nightly, I needed my husband to rub my back. He asked me to see my doctor again.

Because my husband had just started a new job, my mother went with me. Entering the medical facility felt like entering the past. The doctor greeted me happily and reminisced. His version was that he replaced my hardware, rebuilt my spine, and he brought everyone in the operating room a twelve pack to take home to celebrate. “That was a hell of a surgery. Thirteen hours. I could barely stand up!” He laughed.

For me it had been different. My nerves were damaged with that surgery, which he warned might happen, and despite his later efforts, I still had a slight limp and neuropathy. Regardless, when other surgeries had failed this man replaced all of my spinal hardware with painstaking care, rearranged my entire spinal structure, and built me into an upright person. My spine was fused correctly and my organs where they were supposed to be. I owed him the life I was living.

So, when I told him my hips felt like they were dislocating from my sacrum, his smile faded and he transformed into an orthopaedic genius. He laid out my recent x-rays on the lightboard. His black Expo marker traced my Cobb Angle and lines appeared from my hips to the top of my fusion at T2. After an eternity of silence, he turned and said, “Technically, I can’t find anything wrong.”

This was the first time I’d ever heard those words.



“You’re always going to need ‘tune ups.’ The human body isn’t made to be full of hardware. I can do an exploratory surgery and see if there is a deeper cause.”

I turned my head slowly to look at my mother.

“So, I am structurally sound? The pain and movement is normal?”

“You’re going to feel pain with a spine in the state yours is in. Your muscles and the scar tissue are probably responsible and you’ve developed some hypermobility around your pelvis and ribs.”

My eyes settled on the x-rays. Surgeries had burned through years I might have spent living. Instead of going to school, I had laid in bed consuming novels and escaping into worlds in which I could never exist. Did I want another operation?

“No surgery. Are there other options?”

I could feel my mother’s astonishment. The doctor titled his head in surprise.

Ever the surgeon, he asked, “Are you sure? We might find something.”

“Six surgeries are enough.” Number seven could kiss my ass, I thought.

“Okay. Let’s talk about what’s out there non-surgically.” He sounded disappointed, but I was thrilled.

Stable. It hurt like a son of a bitch, but my spine was *stable*. That was all I needed.

### About the Author

*Mary-Pat Buss*

Mary-Pat Buss is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Communication, Cultures, English, and World Languages at Texas Lutheran University. Her research focuses on minimized feminist voices and disability studies, while her work as a nonfiction writer also explores lessons in empathy and representation. She is a recent graduate of Texas State University’s Masters of Fine Arts Creative Writing program, nonfiction winner in the Coalition of Texans with Disabilities Pen2Paper competition, and a D.H. Lawrence Society fellowship recipient. Buss lives in Central Texas and fills her time with friends, shenanigans, and playing with her labradoodle, Daisy.

### About the Work

“Stable” is the story of Mary-Pat’s experiences with scoliosis and surgeries resulting from that original condition. It seeks to humanize the patient ordeal and highlight the challenges that many people with scoliosis tackle. Disability is often minimized and the goal of “Stable” is to help bring it into the light.



“Untitled #5” Lisa Berley, collage and paint, 22 x 30 in., 2011.

## **I was Icarus**

*Christopher Rubio-Goldsmith*

Some days were  
equal parts madness  
and surrender.  
I was Icarus  
and she was the sun.  
The ocean, waiting  
pretending sadness,  
a bloom  
of blue.  
This is how a sky  
Falls?  
Mistake me now.

Faded Rugs

Christopher Rubio-Goldsmith

I only took drugs  
when they were offered at parties  
by others who were doing drugs too.  
I only like  
faded rugs at parties, their sharp colors  
remind me of friends who leave.

I only remember the dancing  
and arriving.  
I only knew her last name and her friends’  
phone numbers.  
I only wanted to smile into his drink  
because his limes were like Lenny Bruce.  
I only sang loudly by the nibbles, and ice cubes.

I only ran my right hand through her hair.  
I only let my left-hand play with the coins  
in my pocket.  
I only spoke three words, because the next word  
was always wrong.  
I only cared a little more than I would care  
at the next party.  
I only know about the wolf.  
I only think at the sky.  
I only just

I only wear the blue velvet sports coat in winter.  
I only hope nothing runs out, and I hide  
bottles of beer behind furniture for later.  
I only wish others did this too.

I only leave through the door, but sometimes  
the door is locked or burning or both.  
I only walk walk walk walk back to the vehicle that  
returns me home. Sometimes it’s mine. If it’s a  
police car, that’s mine too...right...and  
yours too. I mean we all pay taxes.  
I only want to run the sirens through the  
neighborhood alleys.  
I only saw the back of his head.  
I only desire  
a watch and last year’s calendar.

I only practice nostalgia at boredom’s  
pic-nic.  
I only faded rugs on weekends.  
I only remember her last name.  
It sounded like rain on a beach.  
I only cross the street  
to avoid the winds, and pieces of sky  
that might jump.  
I only wanted to say I loved her. It came  
out sounding like the days of fall.

About the Author

Christopher Rubio-Goldsmith

Christopher Rubio-Goldsmith was born in Merida, Yucatan and taught English at Tucson High Magnet School for 28 years. Many years ago he earned a degree in creative writing from the University of Arizona. Some of his works have appeared in *Amuse-Bouche (Lunch Ticket)*, *Gigantic Sequins*, the anthology *America, We Call Your Name*, and other publications too. His wife Kelly often helps edit his work, and he appreciates her support every day.

About the Work

"The alienation we all endure fascinates me. I was a teacher for 28 years in a large inner-city school (over 3000 students) and one of the challenges of the job, that no one discussed, was that teaching itself is isolating and lonely. Even though the poem has nothing to do with teaching, I tried to illustrate the condition of alienation. Another element that influenced me was the limits of language to express emotions. As an English teacher I saw these same boundaries in the literature we experienced in the classroom."



“Landscape with Stars” Henri Edmond Cross (Henri-Edmond Delacroix), Watercolor on white wove paper, 9 5/8 x 12 5/8in., ca. 1905-1908. Open source from The Met.



Karin, in Four Parts

Sarah Berbank Green

Part One

The sun is just right at this time of year. Not that I’m troubled by the darkness, mind you. It’s only that I like it best now, with the evenings that last long into the night and the low sun warm and golden upon the fields. It’s on evenings like these that I think it’s OK to have never left this island and that if this is all I know of the beauty in this world, it’s more than enough for me. If I’d travelled more, perhaps I’d have found something I liked better, and I’d never have seen this island in the same way again. I’d always be lost in the memory of something else, like those broken men returning from war.

On evenings like this, the sky and the sea bleed together until they are one. I climb over the dunes to the flat plane of sand beneath, and I see that expanse and think what it must be to be lost there, no land in sight, with only a boat to stand on and the waves rocking all around. Our sea is large and long, but not limitless. It is small compared to an ocean. And yet it must seem that the water lasts forever when you are lost in the middle of it, the dark waves all around. There is nowhere to stand, nothing solid, nothing to give you comfort, and you are all — you and the other sailors on your boat — stranded there, each of you scared to death within your hearts, none of you brave enough to mention it.

The other islands protect us from the strongest winds, and our sea has no waves. If you didn’t know better, on still and grey days you might imagine the island ended in nothing but an endless mud plain, and the movement of light on the surface was only an illusion made with mirrors. It does not matter. I imagine the waves anyway and the endless roll of the open water.

I have been off the island many times. Of course I have. But not for longer than a few days at a time and never more than 10 kilometers from the ferry dock. Our country is a tiny one anyhow and not much changes from place to place. Even on the mainland, it all looks the same — flat, watery, green and blue and yellow, dark in winter, sometimes grey, and in summer, burning golden. The summer light is a gift from the old gods, maybe, thankful that we still care for the lands that have not been lost to the sea.

Much of the land has been lost to the sea and now the island is smaller than it was when I was a girl. That is fitting. So many of our men, our sailors and fishermen, have also been lost to the sea. Our history is one of getting lost, of setting out and never coming home, of women and children waiting for ships years after the ocean had already decided to put them to rest. What can one say? It was a fact of life then and still is one now. They still set out, these children of the fields and dunes, and never come home. Not because they are dead, of course, but because they want other

things elsewhere. And what is there to draw them home? They’ve left, and the fields, the summer evenings have been spoilt for them. All three of my daughters are gone. One to Oslo, one to Copenhagen, and one, for no reason I can tell, to Prague. I don’t know what she does there. I try to imagine what the city looks like, how it smells, what it must be to live among foreign people like that, to not even understand the language. I suppose she understands some of what they say, but it can’t be like speaking her own language, the words I taught her when she was a baby, that she’s known and understood almost her whole life. Prague used to be a poor place, but not anymore, so they say. I imagine things are more difficult there than they are here. To her mind, even difficult is better than this island. She can no longer see her home properly — not as I can see it, anyhow.

My husband left me, too, but he did not go far. He lives down the road, in a house newer and smaller than the one we lived in together. He has another wife now, but it doesn’t bother me. I have another husband, too. But, what I don’t tell anyone is that my first husband will always be my true husband. He was the first and we raised our children together and there was a time when I loved him best, beyond all things. I cannot say we are friends now, but we do not resent each other much, and when we see each other down at the shop or around the village, we talk just as anyone does, the past just a secret between us two, just a bag of old coins buried beneath a tree. Neither of us has any plans to dig it up, but we both know it’s there and feel better for it all the same.

My second husband, Jonni, works on the mainland, building roads. He takes a small ferry out each morning, along with the other people who work off the island, and comes back in the evening, tired and ready to be home. Before now, the men in my family were always sailors or fishermen, like my first husband. There’s not much of a need for sailors anymore, nor for fishermen, nor for anything the island is able to give to the world. That is all right — I have no sons to carry on the sailing tradition and if I did, I expect that they wouldn’t want to anyway, the world being such a different place from what it used to be.

I stay home, which is not so common anymore, but we have few wants and Jonni’s wages pay for them all. We have saved some money by and by, and we do not worry about growing old. One day we might have to sell this house, but no matter. It has been in my family more than 300 years — the land even longer — and who will be there to take care of it once I am gone? The girls won’t want to come back, not even for the house. They keep telling me I can’t sell it, never to sell it, but what am I going to do when I’m too old to get up and down the stairs anymore, when I can’t get to the bedroom or the bathroom or even clean the floors? They’re not going to come home to look after things. I’m going to find someone who will. It will make a fine holiday home.

I won’t be giving it to my sister or her children, either. When she left this island, I was more than happy to see the back of her. That was the last time I spoke to her, and I don’t care if I ever do again.

In summer, I spend my days in the garden. The garden is the only thing that makes me sad to think that one day I’ll have to leave this house. It’s not the plants I’ll be sad to see go, though I’ve nurtured most of them since they were seedlings. Sure, I love them like a mother now that I’ve no more children at home, but plants die in the way you hope children don’t, and I never get

too attached.

It's the earth I love — and not just the earth, but the gifts it gives me. And though each year I dig straight into the heart of it, right in the same places I dug the year before, it never fails to give me something new — a broken glass bottle, half a saucer, an old nail, leather stirrups, coins, the burnt remains of old timber. These are the things that belonged to my ancestors. These are the things that made up their lives. They threw them out, not because they didn't love them, but because they had used them right up to their end and then returned them to the earth where all things belong. And the earth took them right back, grateful for the gifts. And now it's giving those gifts back to me, thanking me for taking such good care of it and for sticking around so long.

Once I turned up a bullet. It was more likely to have been used for hunting than for anything else, but when I think of the way people lived back then, how dark it was in winter with no electric lights and how unpredictable life was, with ships setting off and never coming home, I can't help wondering. I kept it, wrapped it in cotton batting, and put it in the empty space between the crossbeams of the storeroom.

I planted my garden right in the foundations of the old house. The house burnt down centuries ago and then they built the one I live in now just next to it. If I were going to do it, I'd have built the new house on top, used the brick and stones from the old walls, but I suppose they wanted to keep their distance. Maybe they thought it was bad luck, like stepping on a grave.

This land has always been in my family and it always will be in spirit, long after the sea takes it all back. I suppose there was once a time before my people lived here, but that was so long ago, you can barely imagine it. It is safe to say we have always been here, since time that far gone in the past is something no one can know the truth about, anyway.

In ancient times there was land out there, reaching far into the space covered by the sea, all the way to Sweden, to Norway, even farther, to England. Maybe beyond that, who knows? People lived there in great marshy forests and made their homes on the banks of rivers and ate fish. They also had children and got married, made their own clothes and cooked their own food, fell in love and cried after those who died. They lived whole lives out there, under what is now the sea, but the waters came up and all that past was buried, never to be seen or known once more. You can find their bodies in the marshes, sunken in the bog, and I've heard that sometimes the driftwood that washes up on our shore is from ancient trees, although I couldn't tell the difference. It all looks like wood to me.

I wouldn't be surprised if some of the people who lived on that land beneath the sea were my people, too. We have always been here, that's what I've been told, and I don't doubt that was true in ancient times, as well as now. If it is no longer true in the future, well, that can't be helped.

## Part Two

Karin worked her trowel through the earth with the calm certainty of one who knows her place.

It was mid-June, the planting was over. It was time to tend to the life that had been created, not to bring it forth. Many of the strawberries were already ripe and hung from their stems like droplets, fat and pregnant and deepening into a dark red. She would gather them up and put them in the thick iron pot her mother gave her, mix them with rhubarb and sugar and heat them until boiling, pour them into long-used glass jars to make a strawberry jam. The leftovers she would use to make a pie for Midsummer.

She stood up and brushed the dirt from her hands on the front of her pants. That would do for today. She had not noticed how late in the afternoon it had become. Her daughter would be leaving the next day. She did not want to miss these last moments together, the last moments that she would be a mother, a mother with a child at home and someone besides herself and her husband to care for.

Karin looked up and saw Line already walking towards her, eyes downcast. She had been such a happy, laughing child, but she had grown dark with age. Karin was not surprised that she was leaving. It had been hard on Karin, too, growing up in such a small place, with nowhere to run to, nowhere to be the secret self no one expected you to be. There were so few young people on the island that your friends were chosen for you, and boyfriends were not easy to come by unless you were prepared to make compromises. She supposed it had been hard on her other daughters, too. Both had moved away: her oldest to Oslo and her middle daughter to the capital. She imagined that it was the solitude of this place that had chased them away. But, wasn't it lonely there, too, where they were? Surrounded by all of those foreigners, what did they have of their roots, of their kin to keep them company?

"Hi, Line."

"He's in there."

"Who's in there?"

"He is."

She heard the two men talking inside. It was a stroke of luck that Jonni got on so well with her ex-husband. He wasn't the sort to grow jealous or hold a grudge. That's why she had married him: his even temper, his fairness, his dependability. In truth, they were never officially married. She thought of him as her husband and even referred to him as such, especially in the company of older people, but there had never been any real need or desire to finalize the whole thing. She had never been one to stand on ceremony, nor had her mother nor father nor grandparents been. Living this far away from the world, life took its own shape, and such a thing as marriage became less important than living in a simple way, one that brought you comfort and that you could endure. Whether he was her legal husband or not, Jonni was a good man, a good stepfather to her children, and they had a peaceful sort of life together, even when the whole land was consumed in winter darkness and bore like an anvil on the chests of every man, woman, and child who made their home on the island.

When Karin entered the kitchen, Jonni stood and left, kissing her on the cheek as he walked past. He had work to do, she knew, and had only been sitting with Jesper to be nice. She was grateful to him for this.

Jesper sat in a wooden chair next to the oak table where they used to eat their family meals together, her trying too hard to make everything just as he liked and him drinking just a bit too much to care. A mist of grey had crept in and settled on his yellow hair. His beard was beginning to grizzle. Otherwise, all was as it had been when they were married.

“Jesper, good to see you come around here. You never do anymore. I was beginning to wonder if you hadn’t died — or maybe got yourself a job on the mainland, bought a new flat.”

Jesper laughed. “Yes,” he said, “well, I’ve been busy. The catch was small this winter. I’ve had to make up the work with other things.”

She knew about the catch. Everyone on the island did. The fishermen had all struggled. They still lived by the rules of the sea and the tide, as all the islanders had, until recently. People had to leave to find work elsewhere and living on the island had become more and more of a struggle, a trial, a choice spurred on by stubbornness. There were long commutes by ferry to and from the mainland. In the winter, all was darkness and the chill whipped up from the sea, and the menial jobs the islanders had on the mainland became twice as hard as they would have been if they’d only packed up and moved to a modern flat in town, small, efficient housing paid for by the state, where it made sense to own a car and everything one needed was at a supermarket only a five-minute drive away.

“Well, it always was small some years. But it will come back around. It always does that, too.”

“I don’t know about that. They say the fish are almost done. And, then, with the British — now they control it all and no one gives a damn about the Danish fishermen — it’s all that Europe can do --”

“Ah, Jesper, none of that. I don’t care to hear any of that now. Keep your politics to yourself. What do you want? I know you want something if you’re here.”

“No, no, I don’t want nothing,” and he waved his hand in the air, brushing her away. He was annoyed to have been interrupted and he was beginning to remember why he had left. “I want to see the girl, that’s all.”

Karin gave a quick laugh. “Well, she doesn’t want to see you. Went outside as soon as you came in from what I can see.”

Jesper was annoyed. “Call her in, Karin.”

“She’s too old for that. I can’t tell her what to do now, no more than I can tell you what to do.”

“Just call her in, will you?”

“Line! Come in and see your father!”

They waited a moment in silence, but Line did not come. Karin called again and a few minutes later, they heard her familiar, reluctant step on the front porch. She walked to the threshold and stood there, scowling. The door had been left open to let the air in. The afternoon sun was behind her and it caught her hair — yellow, like Jesper’s — and set it afire. She stood silhouetted in the doorway like an apparition.

Line had always been a pretty child, the prettiest of all her daughters, but in the last year she had grown into a beauty, far more beautiful than Karin had ever been. She was proud of her, the way all mothers are of their children, beautiful or no, but she was afraid for her, too. Beauty is not an easy weight to carry. Line would never be able to slip away, hide in a crowd. The whole world would watch her, expecting her to be more than she was, more than any one person could be. Line was a musician and sang low, like a storm breaking on the horizon. It pained Karin to think that when she sang, people would watch her and think on her beauty, rather than her songs.

But these were not things that she could ever say. Instead, when Line told her she was leaving, Karin only said, “Ah, well, if it is what you want, go ahead. It’s what you all want now, and if you’re not happy here, no one can make you so. It’s a real pity, but I won’t be the one to make you stay.”

“I hear you’re going,” Jesper said.

“Yes,” Line said, staring at him unmoved. It was insolent.

Karin had never understood why Line hated her father so. He had always doted on her, singling her out from the other girls, setting her on his lap after dinner or when they stayed outside late on summer evenings. But, once he had left, she had never wanted to see him again. The other girls would visit him, and Line would cry and squeal, refusing to go. Karin could have made her, but she didn’t want to force it. She had expected Line to come around, but she never did. She was young yet — only 19 — and there was still time for things to improve.

“I suppose I should know more than to expect you to come tell your father goodbye before you left,” Jesper said.

“Yes.”

“It’s to Prague, isn’t it?”

“If you know the answers, why do you ask the questions?”

“Line,” Karin said, hushing her.

Line was quiet and looked at the floor.

“It’s dangerous there,” Jesper said, “They speak Russian. No one knows Danish, there are no Danes there. And with all the wars there — a new war every year. Life is nice enough here. You don’t have to go away.”

Line sighed contemptuously and looked away.

“I have to pack,” she said. “I have things to do.”

“Not a hug for your father, then?”

Line turned and left the room without looking at him. He watched her go with the most intense love — a love that Karin thought, for an instant, was almost unnatural.

“I don’t know why she harbors such anger against you,” Karin said. “Maybe because you left, although she never said anything about it.”

“Maybe something like that,” Jesper mumbled. She could tell that he didn’t want to leave, even though he had nothing more to do there. “A cup of coffee, then?” she offered.

“No, nothing. I’d best be on my way.”

“All right, then,” Karin said. “Goodbye.”

And then she added, “I’ll let you know how she gets on over there, once I hear from her.”

“You do that,” Jesper said and then he was gone.

Karin stood there a moment, listening. Line was in her bedroom upstairs, shuffling around, either packing or pretending to do so. Soon, that sound would be gone forever and Karin would be left with silence, alone until the evening when Jonni came home from work. She would make herself a cup of coffee anyway, enjoy this last afternoon. Afterwards, there was nothing to do but return to the garden, if Line didn’t want her. There were still the strawberries for Midsummer and a bit of digging to do, besides.

### Part Three

“Lick it, lick it,” Helga said, her face screwed up, ugly with malice. “Lick it, or I’ll tell her what you did.”

Karin stood on the sand, the inch-deep water rising and receding around her ankles. With each pass, the water sucked a bit of the shore away with it, the sand beneath her feet lessening, becoming unstable.

A fish lay on the sand a few feet in front of her. Dead, swollen, it reeked of old water and decay.

“Lick it, Karin, or I’ll tell.”

Karin would not, but she was not brave enough to say so. Instead, she stared at the seaweed entangled mass, two fingers pressed to her lips. It was not right for Helga to make her lick the fish. She had only crossed into the dangerous part because Helga had dared her to. She would never have done it on her own — not because she would have been afraid, or because it was forbidden, but because she never even would have thought of it. But Helga had urged her, had teased her for being young and small and too afraid, and so she went to the spot where the dunes had piled up over the fence and she crossed over.

It had been easy to climb over the dune; it took no more than an instant. When she reached the other side and stood on the hard earth below, she felt a tingling inside her ribs. Dangerous.

There were cliffs there — not made of rock, but of sand — and they jutted haphazardly above the sea, large swathes cut out from their sides where the land had crumbled away and fallen into the water below. If you walked too near the edge and stepped in the wrong place, the ground would slide out beneath you and you would go with it, with no way to stop and nothing to hold onto. The earth would simply give way.

When you stood on top of them, the cliffs didn’t seem very high, but Karin knew that the year before a child had been playing there and had died, crushed beneath the red earth and gravel for hours before anyone noticed he was gone. If Karin died, Helga would know, but she would never tell anyone. She’d wait for someone to find Karin by accident and then she’d pretend not to know anything about it, pretend she’d never been there in the first place.

Standing on the wrong side of the fence, Karin was unafraid. The ground seemed hard and solid beneath the fine sand. It was exhilarating. “Now, jump,” Helga yelled, and Karin jumped. She was alive, intoxicated by her own bravery.

“Again,” Helga yelled, “more, more!” Karin jumped again and again, springing her legs up high against her body and pounding hard on the earth below. She slid a bit with each landing, but kept jumping, delirious. And nothing happened, the cliffs did not tumble, the earth did not give way. Helga seemed disappointed.

“Now run to the *edge*,” Helga said, delight in her voice. “*Run.*”

Karin hesitated — running to the edge of the cliff was the one thing she must not do. Exhilarated by the sense of her own bravery, she ran anyway, stumbling in the deep patches of loose sand caught between the hard ridges of the dunes. She did not stop until she was at the edge. She touched it with her fingertips and saw the thin beach littered with stones below. She turned and ran back towards the fence. She had not died. Triumph.

“No,” Helga said, “You were supposed to run to the edge and stay there. And jump.”



Karin looked at the spot on the edge of the cliff where she had just been. The excitement drained from her; she was limp, an empty sack. She shook her head no.

“I knew you wouldn’t,” Helga said.

Karin hesitated. She could not jump there. The land would fall out beneath her and she would die. But then Helga would tease her and call her small and stupid and cowardly. She would tell other children, too — even lying so that Karin seemed even stupider — and Karin would never hear the end of it.

Her legs tensed involuntarily, poised to run. She would do it. She would not be afraid. Helga would not be able to say that she had been afraid.

At just that moment, a half-meter of earth broke away from the cliff wall and slid into the sea, trails of gravel raining behind it. They heard the earth hit the beach below, dash against the ground. The ground had broken exactly where Karin had touched it.

The girls were silent.

Karin stopped breathing. She turned and ran back to the fence, desperate feet pounding the earth. The air opened and rushed up behind her. The earth was giving way, falling into the flat, cruel, open palms of the sea, where it would be pulled down, down into the depths, and never seen again. If she slowed, if she stumbled, she would fall with it, she would be crushed and drowned and lost forever. Karin scrambled over the sand, falling, sliding on her hands, but running, running, as though she would never stop.

She was at the dune, at the fence, she was clambering over it. Loose sand slid beneath her as she climbed, but she was stronger, faster than the falling earth. She reached the top of the dune quicker than she would have believed possible, letting herself fall, tumble downhill to the safe side of the fence, the part that was not dangerous.

She stopped running. Helga was holding her stomach, laughing, loudly — more loudly, perhaps, than what came natural to her. Karin turned to look behind her. Nothing had changed. The cliff had not given way. Besides the small chunk of earth that had fallen from the edge, all was as it had been before.

But now Helga wanted to tell mother and mother would be angry.

“Lick it or I’ll tell the police,” Helga said. “What you did was against the laws, and they’ll take you to jail on the mainland and you’ll never come home.”

The afternoon had already begun to fade and the fish glistened in the golden light. The tide was rising and in a few hours it would take the fish away, back to the belly of the sea where it was born, lived, and had died. Already the water had begun to cut into the sand beneath the fish, streaming past it in little currents that swaddled it like a blanket.

“The police will come for you and no one will be sad. Not mother — she will know you are a criminal. And everyone will forget you and not even care that you are gone. It will be like you’re dead and no one will be sad or even cry.”

The fish lifted one clouded eye to the sky. Karin turned and, for the third time that day, ran, feeling neither exhilaration nor fear, but relief, relief to learn that with all options gone, all doors closed, and the police fast behind her, she still had that, at least — the capacity to run.

## Part Four

The air is muggy, sticky with sea breeze. The water is not salty, but one imagines the brine. In the midsummer light, everything is white gold, sparkling.

On clear evenings, the sun shifts from red to bronze to a blinding platinum. When it is overcast, all is dull, diminished. The colors remain, as they were meant to be, only quieter, less alive. The sea is painted in striations of brown and a pale and sickly blue, a vague silver sheen brushed along the surface. If the thin light breaks through the clouds, it lands upon the water in patches of abalone pearl that seem lit from within by a separate, distant sun, rising weakly from beneath the sea to meet its stronger twin above, a pale invalid wordlessly greeting a bedside visitor with outstretched hand.

Karin picks her way over the dunes. Although they are made of sand, they are hard, compacted by the sea grass. In divots and heaps, the sand rises up between green, dry fingers and makes little beds where fragments of shells, sea glass, old bottle caps have found their final place of rest. They will remain nestled there until the day the land is consumed and they are resurrected, made to tumble once again beneath the wash of the endless, crashing tide.

The beach is made in part by little oblong, dusk-colored stones. In other places, it is made of sand. Everywhere the driftwood piles up — branches pulled from an ancient tangle of heavy, waterlogged trees. The trees have not breathed for over 40,000 years. They have become indifferent to the taste of air.

On the beach they mingle with more recent things: timbers from broken boats, logs of half-charred firewood, trees felled in a storm. Smooth-surfaced, twisted, dark with water and history, they are indistinguishable from one another.

A scientist, an expert, might know which were ancient and which were not. To most people, they are what they are: pieces of wood washed up on the beach.

Karin is more interested in the stones. Perfectly milled, round and flat and deeper in color when they are wet than when they are dry. Take them home and place them on a windowsill and they turn dull and chalky. Leave them on the beach and they look best. It is where they were meant to be.

She picks one stone from among the rest. White, oblong, marked with grey, it fits her palm exactly, like a tool. And, indeed, one edge was chipped, as though knocked away by some patient, diligent hand into a serrated blade to be used, perhaps, for gutting animals — rabbits, maybe, or deer — and skinning the flesh from their pelts. But that is only fantasy. The rock is a normal rock, and the serrations a result of rolling around at the bottom of the sea and being knocked against other rocks.

Could those ancient inhabitants of Doggerland, the land beneath the sea, ever have imagined a world without their trees or rivers or stones? They could imagine, certainly, a world without themselves. They knew no less than we do that death will come for all of us. But a world without their land? A world where no one knew, could never begin to know, the places where they had lived and died? It would have been a world unimaginable to them, where they were unimaginable, too, even to their descendants who carried their blood and bones into the living present, tucking the secret of their lives into their own bodies, unspoken.

They each lived small lives that were, while they still drew breath, big and important, rich with meaning and history and place. Now they are no more. Their lives are no longer, their stories are no longer, nor their histories, nor legends, nothing they ever loved or valued in their world — all of it lost, a world no longer living.

The small artifacts of our lives wash out to sea and return, eventually, inevitably. We stumble upon them as if by chance, finding them collected along the edges of tidal pools or at the feet of dunes. They are rounded, shrunken, transformed by the vast, gentle, rolling waves and the violence troubling the sands beneath.

### About the Author

*Sarah Berbank Green*

Sarah Berbank Green is a writer, artist, and translator. Originally from south Louisiana, she now lives on a sailboat in Brittany, France, with her husband, dog, and two little kittens. You can read more about her sailing adventures at [www.piedaleau.com](http://www.piedaleau.com) or find her on Instagram [@sberbankgreen](https://www.instagram.com/sberbankgreen). This is her first published piece of fiction.

### About the Work

"Since I first began writing stories, the act of sitting down with pen and paper has become a practice in expanding my sense of connection with other human beings. Stories breed empathy. They take our preconceived notions of the world and throw them on end, forcing us to reconsider ourselves and others from new, often startling perspectives. In “Karin, in Four Parts,” I wanted to engage with a character from the inside out, sifting through the fragments of her inner and outer worlds, passions, memories, and misconceptions in order to explore the way in which the narratives we build around our personal experiences shape, color, and sometimes distort our perception of ourselves and our place in the world. In this way, I hoped to show how difficult, and yet how essential, it is to try to truly understand ourselves and those around us — not to mention the whole immense, unknowable, infinitely complicated mess that has composed the past 200,000 years of human life on this planet. We are simultaneously lost in the hugeness of the world and painfully, joyfully present in every moment of creation, and it is in the interplay between these experiences of isolation and connection that we find the purest expression of our humanity. Above all, I hope that this story conveys a deep compassion for human beings, with all of our intricacies and failings, and ultimately serves as a celebration of the connections we bear to each other, our ancestors, and our environment."



*Textile Sample Book, silk, 12 1/8 x 9 3/4 in., 1895. Open source from The Met.*

## **No Ideas**

*Giles Goodland*

For Mahmoud. 'No ideas but in things' -- William Carlos Williams

No day but in the eyes of a boy  
balancing on the line of  
paving that tightropes  
him to school. No moment  
but inside the cat whose  
eyes sunder the territory. Ideas  
crack from surfaces, the light  
hinges from a cloud. A rain  
bow in the drain,  
a bird speaks its bright notion,  
in its beak it cannot be  
song, it bears too much  
that has just this side of  
occurred: the derivative rain,  
opposing clouds crusted  
over the trees:  
nothing without its idea is  
whole. We meet for coffee and  
talk overflows the table and  
notions flood the street. You are  
old, I saw the wind push past you  
as it rushed for the next uprising  
in the trees, and you nearly  
fell. Child is running to  
the next day, making up  
time, eyes ahead, like whatever  
floats on wind there is no idea but in  
hinge, no laughter but in  
night no nights but in bars  
there are no bars but in songs  
we are not the children we  
were but when we were children  
neither were we then those  
children. I see you walking  
on the street, man with child  
inside. He is light. You are light.

Quoth the Sea

Giles Goodland

Beware my kiss among the seaweed stalks  
the bone-lace wave  
rubbishing among the pools  
the whale who booms in to  
bone-bound muscle.

We imagine and then enter it  
and fashion the verb into  
rim of the glistening forgotten.  
Silence is immeasured until  
pointed by brailings of tide-mud.  
I watch the rocks weathering your shoes.  
This we are sinking in is not sand, not  
sad as silk tears on the swell,  
worldclogged water of the eye flows.

The sun under the sea is the sun  
the sea accepts, from  
the seal-swarmling  
wave-tilt at breakwater

beliefs set ashore as person’s  
realm of ice-cream will melt  
in the hands of error’s comedian,  
addressing stuff of waves, casting aside  
handshakes. Licit strong bonds govern us  
but pulled also by underchains, ids,  
the sea has a degree in silence

turns obsequiously  
in pragmatic movements, loosening  
where language rips other language  
apart is where language starts.

About the Author

Giles Goodland

Giles Goodland was born in Taunton, was educated at the universities of Wales and California, took a D. Phil at Oxford, has published a several books of poetry including A Spy in the House of Years (Leviathan, 2001) Capital (Salt, 2006) and Dumb Messengers (Salt, 2012) and The Masses (Shearsman, 2018). He's currently working freelance as a linguistic researcher. His last book was "The Masses" (Shearsman, 2018). Forthcoming in 2021 is "Civil Twilight" (Parlor Press).

About the Work

"My poem 'No Ideas' is dedicated to the memory of my friend Mahmud Kianush, who died in January 2021 after contracting Coronavirus while in hospital being treated for leukaemia. Over his last few months we had worked together on his final book, The Journey."





"The Artist's Mother" Graphite and watercolor washes on paper, 25 5/8 x 20 7/8 in., 1915. Open source from the Met.

## Those Who Cant

Joshua G. Adiar

I learned the word “effeminate” as a third-grader; it was 1985 and I was not yet 9. From the moment I heard it, I was convinced it was a curse, something no one should say – and I wondered why I had never heard it before. It escaped the mouth of Mrs. Ross, one of my two third grade teachers, and I knew she intended it to insult me, but in a way that satisfied her distaste for my demeanor while going over my head at the same time. I was not that kid, however, because I had been a target for a long time; I also, on occasion, adopted the affect of a forty-year-old. Queer kids learn to do that early, once they realize they are ‘different.’

She used the word to decree her dismay at the idea that I spent recess sitting at the edge of the asphalt playground reading a book or talking to the girls in my class. “You need to start behaving normally,” she hissed, “no one likes an effeminate boy.” Though the word itself confused me, I received her message loud and clear. She was the latest old lady – my paternal grandmother had been the first – to declare I could not “act like a girl.” Like my grandmother, my behavior – though it was no *act* – bothered her tremendously. Femininity, when I was its source, felt foul and fake to them – though they themselves were feminine figures.

“You’re the kind of boy who likes silk drawers,” my great Uncle Paul told me when I was four or five. My grandmother cackled in delight as she chimed in, “he’s a little *light in the loafers*.” I didn’t know what they meant then, either, but I understood that they detested me. I was their figure of fun and revulsion, whenever we met. I was afraid of them and told my mother I didn’t want to be around them – though never explaining why. When I went to school shortly thereafter, I quickly understood that women and girls were more often – though not always – safer friends for someone like me.

Teachers adored me all the way through second grade. They raved to my mother about what a sweet, smart, and obedient child she had raised. I made good marks and never caused commotion. While they might have looked somewhat askance at my denim book bag with its big blue applique bunny that I insisted mother make me, I think they largely felt relief that I was nothing like my unruly, proto-masculine older brother. If they whispered and wondered whether I would have trouble when I was a teen, they never let on. Surely I was not the first feminine boy they had schooled.

For I was just feminine, despite what Mrs. Ross would have had me believe. There was no excess or artifice in my behavior. I was a sweet kid who liked school. I wanted desperately to fit in, though I always failed. I liked myself so it was difficult to see why I should change. No one taught me how to hide my automatic reactions, to study the swagger of older boys to avoid being bullied. I was generous and emotive; I hated P.E. and didn’t like roughhousing. I did not know that making myself clear in all these regards was closing doors with me forever on the wrong side.

In that ‘effeminate’ instant, I understood that she hated me; I sickened her. The alliance that I had shared each preceding year with my teachers, a sort of secret, unspoken pact that they would



protect me had now perished. She did not care how well I performed or behaved, my existence enraged her. “Go play on the monkey bars!” she would command, “you cannot play with the girls.” An early adopter of amateur conversion therapy, she apparently believed that I would catch masculinity if she forcefully exposed me to it often enough.

Instead, she inoculated me. When I would reluctantly remove myself to the jungle of the monkey bars, I would be met with what I took to be masculine proclamations: “faggot,” “fairy,” and “fudge-packer.” If my older brother was in the crowd, he would take part – certain that my condition was catching. He knew if he stood up for me that the other kids would know he had caught it and treat him accordingly. When I turned to Mrs. Ross as this litany let loose, she merely smiled at me – though whether out of delight at seeing me reap my just desserts or purely casual cruelty, I cannot say.

Not every day went this way. Everything depended upon which teacher took primary control of lunchtime recess. If it was Mrs. Crockett, my former second grade teacher, the atmosphere was pure carnival. Her name ought to have been Mrs. Crooked because she was an abject alcoholic who could barely hold her head up. In fact, sometimes she didn’t. My primary reminiscences of her pedagogical plan conjure up classes filled with endless excuses for students to massage her back and rub her neck. She always carried a coffee cup that smelled strongly; my parents didn’t drink so I couldn’t call it whiskey then. Her eyes were bloodshot; her nose purple. She often passed out during the Disney films she assigned us to watch from the reel-to-reel projector she made us learn to operate.

Today, Mrs. Crockett would have been canned – and quickly. She was always lovely towards me, though she too had her cruelties. My friend Leslie, a girl who was sometimes incontinent, ended up locked in our classroom closet for one such calamity. While stuck in solitary, crouching among stacks of calculators and coloring books, she sprang another leak that drained under the door – much to the delight of those who detested her. For the remainder of her time at Yorkwood – another ten years – she was permanently “Pee Face.” No one ever let her forget that Mrs. Crockett locked her in the closet which, they claimed, she mistook for a restroom.

If Mrs. Crockett was finding it difficult to deal on a given day, Mrs. Schreiber usually stood in. She was the terminator of the third grade; old as Methuselah and mercilessly mean. She was my other third grade teacher and she adored me – a feeling that was mutual. She took nothing from nobody and everybody knew it. She had been teaching since my parents were students and wore her lifetime’s worth of uncut hair in an overblown bun the size of a casaba. I have no sense that she actually taught me much, but I liked her law and order classroom. Recess was no different; had she heard those boys they’d likely have been hung. I exchanged Christmas cards with her until she passed away when I was twenty-five; she seemed like a drag queen prototype to me.

Her major contribution to the carceral state of our school was the refrigerator box banishment. She suffered no fools, as many of my friends – and foes, fortunately – found out. It was never entirely clear what would set her off. Her advanced age and antagonistic energy meant that she perceived many prosaic actions as direct frontal assaults for which there was only one answer: being locked in **the box**. My friend Crystal couldn’t stop chewing on her hair. Because this was before the days of *My Strange Addiction*, I doubt anyone could have told her parents she was

suffering childhood trichophagia and needed counseling. Instead, Mrs. Schreiber invited her to chomp away in the privacy of the box in which she received her Frigidaire. As an added bonus, she would then ascend to her stepstool and use the prison as her podium – decorated as it was with construction paper, bunting, and the tearstains of students who had definitely learned their lesson.

If Mrs. Schreiber had seen what was happening to me, I suspect she would have hotboxed whomever she deemed responsible – even Mrs. Ross. It’s a shame she couldn’t have done the same for Mrs. Crockett so she could have dried out, but then perhaps she should have locked herself in her own closet and left poor Leslie alone. Mrs. Schreiber never did see, sadly, and I was too ashamed to tell her. I did not know then that feminine boys are an absolutely fabulous alternative to humdrum mainstream masculinity, prosaically type-cast simply because of the presence of a penis. It’s a shame that I didn’t know Mrs. Ross’s eldest grandson was also the recipient of similar slander from his so-called granny.

When she saw that I would not succumb to her machinations, Mrs. Ross raged. She liked neither how I walked nor the way I talked; both were too lilting and lisping. If she couldn’t make me a macho third-grader, she would send me away. After canting and chanting, riling and reviling, she came to the conclusion that containment was the sole solution. I could not be recess-redesigned; I was decidedly diseased. She saw her chance when I crashed a math test: I had a learning disability and should be quarantined in the special ed classroom. After all, hadn’t my older brother been relegated to that realm already?

Perhaps he had been right after all – queerness was confusingly communicable. My mother, however, was having none of her ballyhoo. “My son has received consistently high marks,” she instructed with the aid of past report cards. Now because he’s done poorly – though still passed – on one exam, you believe he needs special education?”

“These things run in families, Mrs. Adair,” Mrs. Ross replied, her mouth full of smarm.

“Like hell they do. Joshua’s brother should never have been placed in special ed. He’s a troublemaker and for that you’ve placed him with the other handful of kids who suffer everything from autism to artificial legs. That room’s an asylum, not someplace kids can learn. Why do you think we’re trying to take him out of there?”

“I couldn’t say, Mrs. Adair, but those are ugly accusations. I’m sure their teacher would be troubled to hear that’s what you think.”

“Believe you me, I’ve already told Rita Shyke exactly what I think of her. She told me one day I’d be grateful if my kid could read a newspaper; that’s all the aspiration she has for him.”

“I am not here to tear down Mrs. Shyke, Mrs. Adair. We believe Joshua needs special attention. Please sign the release or you’ll regret it.”

To my mother's credit, she did not. She insisted that I stay where I was at and try harder. In retrospect, her analysis of the "special ed" program in which my brother was enrolled was absolutely awful – and indeed an asylum of sorts. Physical and mental challenges – intellectual and emotional – were all lumped together and uniformly ignored. The kids were removed from the general population and cordoned off in a single classroom in which, most frequently, the preferred form of teaching was reading them the *Review Atlas* – the local newspaper.

While my brother felt alienated in there, he loved the utter lack of rigor or requirements. He got to join the "regular" kids during recess – though not all of his classmates did – and that was all the normalizing he needed. I, on the other hand, was mortified at the mention that I would be taken out of the mainstream. I developed intense anxiety – in the third grade – and started to experience serious stress and fear as I forged a connection between my femininity and failure. Mrs. Ross saw me as a failure simply because I was feminine; I didn't understand what was wrong with me, so I started endless self-scrutiny to stave off any such future humiliations.

It was around that time that I started dreading school. I would break down at the bus stop and experience mini-panic attacks about leaving my mother. The kids were increasingly cruel – especially the boys – as they sensed I had no place in their pack. Some girls were sympathetic, but their protections only went so far – they had themselves to think of, too. I clung to Mrs. Schreiber when I could, but she could not intervene in the bathrooms or during gym class. Those were the places I really needed help as the other boys began to learn how to bully in a big way. The P.E. coach, Mr. Seward, took a page out of Mrs. Ross's book and believed he could be more successful at saving me from my sissy self.

Over the next three years I would take to calling him Mr. Sewer, right to his face. He had taught my mother, you see, and she taught me that trick. He had hated her, too, back when he was a novice teacher of English and she a high school senior, four years his junior. "Squeaky works too," she said, recalling the taunts it took to take him down. "He was a bully back then," she said, recalling few fond memories of the man who couldn't cut it teaching literature and turned to kickball instead. He knew I was calling him Sewer, but thanks to mother's interventions I was somewhat off-limits in terms of making further trouble. Instead, he tortured me himself.

He took every chance to humiliate me in front of my classmates. I was something of a classic queer cliché in that – and many – regards, so I had little facility in the wild world of sports. Instead of kicking the ball, I somehow caught my heel, rolled my foot over it, and fell flat on my back. I could not hit a baseball to save my life; I did, however, once substitute my own skull for a softball when I stepped too close to a classmate at bat. He damn near knocked me out and we all had a good laugh, Mr. Sewer included, about what a stupid sissy I had been. This incident, like so many, went unreported though certainly not unremarked.

Apart from periodically playing the part of pansy piñata, I also developed a reputation as the kid who never came to classes on Mondays. I suddenly felt ill a lot. The doctors could not say exactly what was wrong – some thought asthma, or maybe allergies – others suggested I was just experiencing growing pains and having a difficult time fitting in at school. I felt awful all the time, except for Friday night and Saturdays. Friday nights were my favorite because I knew when I went home Mom would be waiting and we'd have something fun for dinner – usually

pizza. We'd watch *The Dukes of Hazzard* or *Knight Rider*, *Mr. Belvedere* and *Webster*. If we were really good, we could stay up till ten and watch *Falcon's Crest*. I don't think my siblings cared about that show, but I loved the big house and the flamboyant people. I liked to be industrious even then, though, so I usually worked ahead in my spelling workbook as we watched television.

I always wanted to be prepared and I loved learning. Even my parents made fun of my fiendishness for working weeks ahead on assignments while we were having a fun Friday night. I wanted to do well and succeed and everything Mrs. Ross taught me that year made me think just being myself could impede that possibility. If I weren't working on my spelling or math skills, I was reading the Nancy Drew mysteries I checked out from the school library that Mrs. Ross told me boys shouldn't bother with. "You should be reading hardier stuff," I thought she had commanded, but in retrospect I think it was probably "Hardy" – as in Boys – stuff. I didn't care. I loved Nancy Drew; she drove a convertible, wore a stylish scarf, and seemed utterly independent. She made me want to solve mysteries.

Saturdays were safest; there was no school to contend with and we usually had something fun or interesting to do. If not, I read or begged Mom to teach me to sew or embroider. I don't know what she thought about that exactly, but I come from a very hands-on family, so she obliged. Her only rebuke – if it even was that – was to send me to the garage to work with my dad periodically. Working with him meant sanding old cars and sweeping floors – even at that age – and while I didn't relish that work, I learned a lot of skills no one associates with a sissy. She also told me not to tell my friends at school about sewing – suggesting she suspected I was suffering just for being myself.

Sundays were absolute agony, especially after five pm. I dreaded the next day and I knew the minute *Murder, She Wrote* ended, I would have to go to bed. I hated Jessica Fletcher for that; she always ended on the high note that sounded like me being sent to my destruction. Unlike my siblings, I headed straight upstairs. I knew what I had to do and my anxious reaction flooded me with such dread that prolonging the moment only made it worse. By dinner that day I had already selected my clothes for the next day and carefully packed all I would need in my bag. I tried to think of every terrible possibility and plan for it. I wanted to be prepared.

I envied my siblings their carefree carelessness. They both hated school and couldn't understand why I got so wound up. They had not planned for or done anything proactive and their days usually turned out better. I would lay in bed after my mother turned out the lights and watch the hall light turn my ceiling fixture into a strange mushroom cloud against the sea of orange flowers on the wallpaper, symbolizing the upcoming explosion of Mondays. Perhaps it was that floral wallpaper that rendered me irretrievably feminine – it's hard to say. Either way, I was the only nine year old I knew – then or now – who suffered severe insomnia.

I would often lay there for an hour or more and tell myself little stories – childish things – about how the teddy bears on my bed would take care of me. I often thought of a birthday card my mother had given me the year before with actual teddy bears posed around a fancy tea table having a little party. Even though I knew it wasn't real, I imagined them coming to life – and then to my rescue. Those bears had spent a lot of time with me and surely they could vouch for

my fine behavior and pure intentions, I reasoned, though in somewhat less sophisticated language. They knew I wasn't bad or the kind of person to be avoided. They loved that I might like to throw a tea party or cuddle a bear. They were my early allies and sometimes these stuffed bear-fantasies of friendship – my favorite of whom was called Button-nose – would lull me enough to sleep.

Most often, however, anxiety prevented it and by about the time they were whining about the weather on the local news – around 10:15 – I was back downstairs in the well-lit living room pleading to sleep on the couch. I can't say why, but sometimes a change in location helped. Other times, I would just lay there, too, traumatized by what awaited on Monday morning. Sometimes when I appeared, Mom would get extremely frustrated and make me go back upstairs. I don't think she fully understood the depth of my despair or the weight of worry about what lay ahead.

Many Monday mornings I pleaded illness. "I can't go;" "please don't make me go;" and "this is the last time," became common refrains. I was tightly wound and buttoned up for someone not much older than a tot, so I didn't want to tell her about the boys hitting me or messing with me in the bathroom. I did not want to talk about the terror I felt when I had to face Mrs. Ross or the Sewer. I just wanted to be left alone to learn. While it bothered me a great deal that so many of them hated me, I didn't understand why they always had to keep at me. Couldn't I just be ostracized or treated like a ghost beneath the contempt of actual contact?

I dreamed sometimes of Casper and imagined the possibilities of invisibility. I wanted to be in the classroom, marking good marks rather than missing every Monday. If people couldn't see me, then I could just go about my business and succeed at being a student. If people couldn't be nice to me, I figured, I could do without them. I never bothered or sought out souls I didn't want to associate with, I never understood why they couldn't do the same. Certain types – and it took me many years to discover this – try to fight their insecurity by seeking out those they perceive to be weak or wonky in some way. I suppose I knew this on some level even then, thanks to my older brother Sean.

He had sensed something wrong with me from basically the moment I was born. His first complain came when I laid about as a baby: "he doesn't do anything!" he had carped to my mother. In an attempt to animate me, he planted himself on my chest and trickled drops of Baby Aspirin down my throat in an attempt to help me OD. When that didn't work, he waited. I became more animate and he decided he didn't care for my moves. He slid me face first, midget-bowling-style, into a chair's rocker and split open my face. He liked the stitches that supported his stories of fratricide, but ultimately felt the tale lacked finality – so he talked four-year old me into drinking battery acid in my dad's auto shop. Much to his chagrin, my mother caught me mid-slurp and spirited me away to have my stomach pumped just prior to the metamorphosis that would have made me a Casper for real.

He would try stitches to the head – right above the last set under my right eye – for the last time that same school year. He tripped me intentionally and I bashed my head into my mother's tea cart's corner and split my skin but good. As I lay in the operating room with a tissue over my face, mom held my hand and I watched the tip of the needle peek in and out. All I could think was, "this means I won't have to go to school on Monday." And I didn't, which was also

probably a relief to my brother. I was an endless embarrassment he wished to destroy, his sixth-grade masculinity fracturing with new fissures every time my feminine self entered his schoolyard vicinity.

Not long after, I contracted chicken pox for the second time – something everyone says cannot happen. I had never been happier than when Mom told me I wouldn't be able to go to school for at least a week. I didn't feel that badly, but I did have three nasty blisters to complement the string of stitches on my face. I happily sat around the house in my pajamas and bathroom, embroidering a little sampler of a lion that my mother had dug out of some box. My heart nearly broke when I realized I'd been pulling the needle through my clothes and accidentally appliqueing the sampler to my robe. I had to cut my poor lion's face apart and start over, but fortunately I had the time to do so now that I was legitimately diseased.

Each night my younger sister, then a first-grader, would bring home my assignments from Mrs. Schreiber and Mrs. Ross, who I assume was delighted to imagine me left in some leper colony – though not for the 'contagion' she had called out. Mrs. Schreiber, on the other hand, sent me a get well card with a sheet of St. Patrick's Day stickers she knew I would enjoy. To this day I still think of her fondly as that wonderful witch flying in front of the crescent moon on the Halloween stickers she applied to perfect work – otherworldly and a force with which to be reckoned, even if she did practice false imprisonment from time to time. Mrs. Fuller, my first grade teacher, also sent me some special pencils through my sister, along with her "best." I felt buoyed up as the scabs subsided and it became clear I would, in fact, eventually have to return to school.

What remained of the year was not easy, nor would school ever truly be again. Though I cannot accuse her of complete causation, Mrs. Ross contaminated my educational career in calculated ways. I arrived in her classroom already uneasy and fearful because of the "funny" remarks – what we now call slurs – of certain sects of my family about my femininity. I even wondered if I was actually a girl, or at least ought to have been. In their narrow framework for life, people with interests and inclinations labeled as feminine – an arbitrary and socially constructed distinction at best, an excuse for vehemence and violence at worst – very well ought to own a vagina. All the rest of us femmes – regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity – ought to undergo some sort of cure for our sickness or at least have the good taste to disappear from public sight.

As I moved through the school system – a model student with stellar grades and behavior – my fellow students amped up their aggression as passivity overtook the faculty. Never again would I have a teacher who would outright tell me not to be girly; not to be like a girl. She was the only one to tell me directly that femininity is offensive – and seemingly manufactured – in a man while not-so-subtly implying the same is not necessarily untrue in a universal sense. Something about me mirrored back to her some sadness or dissatisfaction with herself *and* her family and rather than face her fear of femininity she set out to destroy it. Sadly, she fell into the age-old sand trap of believing that someone or something feminine is therefore weak and perfectly easy to destroy.

Her own existence and survival in world that is frequently unwelcoming to women ought to have taught her otherwise, but perhaps I grant too much. My teachers – both male and female – from junior high forward did little to protect me from the savagery of many of my schoolmates, even

as they praised my prowess in the classroom. They knew my misery; they saw me sit apart from the rest every lunch hour just to have some peace. They knew that I would not speak unless spoken to, the phantom pupil fearful of the fun that would be made when they heard the sound of my voice or the words I would choose. They all knew I was being tortured physically and mentally, to varying degrees depending on the day, even as they canted about fair chances, camaraderie, and equality to us all without ever offering even the smallest example of what that might look like in actuality.

Perhaps they did not know themselves; theory and practice are very different things. As a high schooler I often troubled myself with a story my parents had told about their “queer” classmates in high school and the horrors that had befallen their classmates – perhaps including my parents, I was too paranoid to ask – for failing to fit in. Boys’ heads shoved in toilets, others forced to fit soiled jockstraps over their faces, family homes covered in graffiti – these were the fees for their femininity. Mom expressed sadness at those stories, but then she also let it be known that one of the victims was the father of a girl I was friends with at school. I suddenly started to wonder if Lisa really liked me or if she just didn’t want to see me treated like her father had been. I thought better of asking, though, if he were anything like me – and apparently he was – he wouldn’t have wanted to share his shame with her.

In the end, I obviously survived – which I consider no small feat. One of my last teachers in high school was also a Mrs. Ross – the daughter-in-law and then the ex-daughter-in-law in the same year of the original – when I was a senior. She taught history and had an interesting one, too. She had been my mother’s classmate when they graduated in ’66. The second Mrs. Ross had had a rough go of it in school too, which she and Mom both confirmed in various ways. This Mrs. Ross was also the mother of that grandson some might call effeminate, because they prefer to label such attributes and behaviors as a condition in need of medicalizing and managing.

Isn’t it funny that we don’t have a comparable word – a binary term – for masculinity? Oh sure, there’s manly or butch – and both can be applied in derogatory ways – but they don’t attack masculinity itself in the way ‘effeminate’ does femininity with its denotation of overrefinement and cloying artifice. No, manly and butch both applaud such qualities, though they may insert some suspicion if the actor evincing them carries the so-called wrong genitals – and that isn’t even always the case. ‘Effeminate’ is term designed to hurt, to degrade men and women both, all while underscoring a presumption of inherent falseness on the part of the possessor.

Mrs. Ross the younger, as it would happen, took the blame for her boy’s physical beauty and fey qualities. She had doted too much, coddled too closely; it’s the shelf worn tale of the twentieth century thanks to Mr. Freud. She pushed, projected, and pampered her femininity onto him and how he was, at least according to his grandmother, destroyed. Men like that never amounted to much. I imagine old Mrs. Ross picturing him slinking in the shadows, *Dorian Gray*-style, as he succumbed to every vice and perversely dismissed every virtue. What it must be like to find femininity – especially when you inhabit it yourself – so offensive. During that year, though, we learned a lot about history – though not as much as we did about Jim, the soon-to-be ex-husband the old lady raised.

Divorce was on the young Mrs. Ross’s mind from the moment we matriculated. She would teach

my tiny high school class of twenty-nine students all the ins-and-outs of D-Day – June 6, 1944 and her own, which happened sometime in December of ’93. Her separation manifested before us physically on the first day of class; the once-heavy woman had returned severely slim with several shades of blond in her hair. We were, in those ways, very much alike that September. Unlike with her mother-in-law, we felt a strong affinity for one another and as she teased me about becoming a bottle blond, I dished it back about possibly sharing a frosting cap in the future.

In the coming months she would imbue our lives with stories of combat and cruelty – though it wasn’t always clear if they were purely personal or part of public record. My adversary from nearly a decade before had been a mother given over to the mania of masculinity. She wanted manly man sons and would not settle for less. The implication imparted in all her stories suggested that no man ever measured up for the old woman. Her sons demonstrated endless weakness from day one and she did everything in her power to pummel it out of them. They were treated to no comforts or kindness – and shockingly – still could not manufacture the masculinity she found so amazing.

So they started to drink – Jim to a point he could not control, which served as further evidence to mother of his fraudulent manhood. He became violent and could not function as he saw fit. Life became an endless brawl whose soundtrack was the chorus of his mother admonishing him to be a ‘real’ man. My mission here – though I’m painfully aware it may seem otherwise – is not to make her a monster. She was not alone in her treatment of me or her son and there were certainly other students who thought the old Mrs. Ross a wonderful woman. What I wish to illustrate, rather, is that ways in which these forms of violence and abuse take root when we fetishize masculinity and demonize femininity.

I could have spent considerable time here psychologizing about her obsession with this unobtainable ideal, but I am opting instead to operate from the position that you need only look around you at virtually anything to discover the ways in which masculinity and its supposedly endless merits are mirrored back to you. It’s everywhere and totally inescapable. It is a considerable act of resistance to take up the fight for femininity in a world where masculinity is all that seemingly matters and those of us who aren’t work our way through well-established structural systems – like schools, for example – without having the femininity completely beat out of us. And sadly, in the grimmest of ways – as the news tells us almost every week – some don’t.

Young Mrs. Ross, in the end, found her husband’s masculinity – for all his own fears and his mother’s pronouncements that it was flagging – too much to bear. Angry and aggressive in its expression and yet somehow still needy and insecure simultaneously, she came to understand its current configuration as a boundless black hole. We construct it as such; should it ever reach the level of satisfaction, certainty, and security about which it endlessly boasts, the whole system would likely self-destruct as many of the shoring-up behaviors demanded for its maintenance would simply cease. We would all then likely fall into a deep, undisturbed extended sleep because that shit is exhausting and seemingly inescapable and in need of a total reset. Sadly, young Mrs. Ross started dating shortly thereafter; her new suitor had just left his first wife and bought a sports car, so you can imagine how well that turned out.

Old Mrs. Ross died not long after the divorce; perhaps our collective feminine defiance finally did her in. Needless to say, I didn’t send flowers. I saw a photo of her grandson around the same time and he looked similar to me. We survived, as did countless other sissies like us – though I’m sure the words they used to describe us, and maybe still do – were far less kind. I thought then, as I do now, about all those sweet kids – and not just the ones like me – whose lives were altered in painful, problematic ways by the people who were allegedly there to educate us. I also marveled that when masculinity malfunctions, it lashes out. Those of us who are feminine, when our lives are fraught, internalize and overachieve. We may inflict pain, however unintentionally, but our sense of entitlement – if indeed it exists at all – does not frequently focus upon inflicting destruction. When masculinity collides with education, definite damage is done.

Implicit in the decision to teach is the promise to try to protect and to prevent damage as much as possible. Instead, what I encountered most frequently were educators characterized by ineptitude and inaction, particularly for the kids who were “different” or seen as deviant. The most fragile few among them, sadly, decided to inflict their insecurities on children with little leeway to lash back. Oh sure, they talked a good game and appeared to ascribe to all the feel-good friendliness that now characterizes the marketing of the American school system, but whenever I hear anyone trot out the trite “those who can’t...” I edit out the apostrophe and remember they say what they preach rarely describes their practices.

**About the Author**

*Joshua G. Adair*

Joshua G. Adair is Professor of English at Murray State University, where he also serves as coordinator of Gender & Diversity Studies. Adair’s work, whether in literary, historical, or museum studies, examines the ways we narrate – and silence – gender and sexuality; it has appeared in over fifty scholarly and creative nonfiction journals. Along with Amy K. Levin, he has edited and contributed to two collections: "Museums, Sexuality, and Gender Activism" and Defining Memory."

**About the Work**

"Those Who Cant" explores a queer student's survival -- and success -- despite some educators' focus on his self-eradication rather than traditional education.





"field of here and not here" Hildy Maze, oil, paper, collage, 36 x 48 in., 2019

## Large Soft Woman Names & Splits the World into Various Parts

Becca Barniskis

the part that is terrible in its terror                      terra firma ticking away  
time-bomb-like                      ready to tear bodies and homes and terrain into tiny pieces

this part over here that fell off the cliff                      fuck, now it is broken  
is someone going to fix this?

the inspected part and the part that slipped through without any oversight whatsoever

the part:                      I have no idea why I exist

and:                      I do and it's not important anyway

the part that is supreme                      part supermarket part subprime loan submachine gun gunning

what part do you prefer? or is it part of what you do prefer is a part that is backordered  
forever so you never                      have to face it

that part pant panting like a dogmanwomanchildthief                      crying a little and a laugh  
escaped too

part of wearing pants is the legs isolated                      the genitalia held loose or free  
or fierce or closely held                      like a company can be  
like the centuries-old secrets of the Church can be                      unleashed                      &tongues

the part that is hellfire licking extremities to infinity

the part that is silk that is soft close-fitting gold                      a robe-way-of-life                      a jumpsuit lark

the part that is blooming growing and keeping                      being alive despite ongoing onslaughts  
of slaughter

the outliving part

the part heaped with corpses                      corrupting into more                      chaos

all the parts necessary for survival: fucking, bearing, birthing,                      fucking feeding,  
fucking fighting

Corporate LargeSoftWoman®

Becca Barniskis

1.

Lissome in plate glass	bend badge to scanner
Light step through	door into cube
Lift flounce back	on the sit down
Salty girl blanks	the talk out
Siren call line one	who’s calling
Signaling with fire	managerial ebb and flow
What if they	notice liquid black lips
What if they	don’t
What if they	see through tents pitched in defiance of fire codes
La la the law	ain’t really on her side
Like a lady	sporting a light support weapon
Lickety split this	kindling for a fire
Skin the rabbit	
Stir the pot	
Send a message	to Gerald in accounting
Who’s hungry	we are
Who wants to go	lunch hunting
Whose responsible	we are

for this particular department’s encampment?

2.

Various LargeSoftWomen® mill about  
the glasswalled breakroom feathered tails brushing one another  
and crushed up against the walls

Smoky eyes behold a plate of food held high by a slender arm  
will it drop not yet but soon the time  
will come when spills become “opportunities”  
.

It isn’t a holiday and it isn’t a party unless someone’s lit  
herself on fire murmurs the Senior LSW®  
blowing smoke off the rooftop

3.

decamp decamp all souls enlarge then park  
themselves in a body following the “esprit de corps” memorandum  
they march the night from floor 2 on up through human  
resources past technical mistakes that marred fourth quarter gains  
searching ever higher for that sales rep who snidely brusquely  
that supervisor with his hands—

wait while one Blue Wolf dissolves  
just ahead, slipping like the moon does  
across snow and granite, climbing higher  
into the starved air of the stairwell out through the unlocked door  
thick fur just visible against roof pebbles until the sky finally  
swallows it

4.

except there is no wolf only only see  
the campaign expands to fill the need  
with each new squad that arrives fewer employees  
remain

the new world gets closer  
and it’ll be much finer fuller than the one before  
she said turning from the window

Large Soft Woman Words Wrung from Paintings of the *Europe and America 1600-1900* Galleries at the Minneapolis Institute of Art  
Becca Barniskis

rosebud	absent-minded	sky	cleaning	clouds
icy	greedy	anemic	ohfuck	whatnow
shopping	bored	sweeping	bored	keeping/kept
bored	this again	clever	confident	titties
turned on	smart	slit	bemused	thanks
polished	minty	twee	faraway	bored
top heavy	bent	cunt	private	wily
baby	moody	baby	crying	baby
ignore	whatever	disheveled	peony	horrorstory
wily	busy	okayokay	waiting	relief
done	thanks	proud	weary	choked
alone	okayokayokay	horny	trapped	raped
fed	fed-up	bare	cold	bare
gone	blood	bare	ache	fuckthis
strength	proper	pink	cuddle	nowwhat
resigned	chilblains	concerned	satisfied	sever
fight	nurse	clean	vagina	dustdust
beleaguered	hunchback	ivory	marble	veined

mottled	smooth	self	mirror	property
mine	queen	mine	ladylike	it's-all-mine

Large Soft Woman as a Motor Force of Revolutionary Struggle

Becca Barniskis

I was thrown into the deep end: an  
unoccupied ideological space full of  
greeny chlorine and blue bent light.  
I dared to struggle; to swim.

Our efforts are big equals Now & Power.

I acquired a voice and a capable pistol  
with supersonic precision. It tells me  
things at the tiniest level of detail  
that I never heard anywhere else.

The fight is zero rolling toward Noted.

I have endured a series of soft warring states:  
global reach versus locavore tendencies,  
tender heart sheathed in steel, the mother  
marching for and against her own.

Force is Mass times acceleration.

I want to share that; elevate the unheeded.  
Commit to shoot, poison, and stab  
practitioners of the paranoid style.  
Soon Zone Ultra will come for they who hold sway.

The period of being strangled is ending.

Free

Becca Barniskis

- to be rude
- to select another
- to be alive
- and interred inside a plastic dome in the desert if one has enough money
- to be stuck with peace of leaf of spinach in front-facing beak
- to be made war of
- to stockpile weapons
- to destruct a mass on a scale
- to weigh too
- and too much so
- to enlarge a body part by accident
- to shun and feint
- to feel fear even inside one’s marrow
- to be nervous about taking the last bone
- to take the last one
- to enjoy it
- to enjoy being the one who takes the last bone
- to spit into infinity
- to bookend tragedy with diatribic dieting advice
- to conduct a highly-decorated home décor from one’s bed
- and send it packing when insubordination rears its head
- to sleep and sleep on mismatched sheets
- to wake perchancing
- to take it all in
- to wear the shiny one instead of the regular
- to take it all off
- to smell and be smelled smelling smells



About the Author

Becca Barniskis

Becca Barniskis: "Witnessing the U.S. government’s colossal and complete disregard for human lives and suffering during the COVID-19 pandemic has enraged me. Their prioritizing of profits over people goes hand in hand with their ongoing racist cop terror against Black people. And with their wanton destruction of the earth’s environment. And while I have always been uncompromising in my writing and art making, I feel now more than ever that my work must challenge people’s assumptions about race, gender, class, and power. Otherwise, why bother."

About the Work

“My “Large Soft Woman” poems explore through voice and character the oppression of women as a material condition of capitalism; they also make visible the ways women do or can seize power in various ways. I am interested in all the ways women appear and disappear in daily life and discourse and have found the label “Large Soft Woman” helpful in this regard."

About the Artist

**Hildy Maze** (Nov. 29 1949 - July 2, 2020) Hildy Maze submitted work to *Inverted Syntax* in 2019. We reshare in this issue this piece of art that she granted us the ability to publish. May her memory be a blessing.

“I’m an American artist with Turkish, Russian, Austrian heritage. Born in Brooklyn, NY I received a BFA from Pratt Institute. For years, I lived and worked in my loft in Tribectman, Cristina Riveraa, NYC before moving to East Hampton, NY where I currently work and live.”

About the Art

“Living in this culture of the selfie this work turns the idea of “selfie” on itself in that I’m investigating the mind through these contemplative images questioning how and why we ignore our inherent basic nature of mind. We ask questions about everything out there; I’m questioning that which creates the question, i.e. our mind. Each image represents thoughts and emotions happening in the space of our mind. I see this work having a sense of community, a universal benefit beyond being a “picture”. I use abstract figurative representational form as the reference point giving the images an intimacy. These images evolve from within themselves, unfolding in a chain of experiments and reactions. Each piece is the result of a singular unpredicted development that varies from image to image, each with a collaged layering, fluctuate somewhere between the painterly and the graphic. Over the course of time, I have developed an

expanding repertoire of forms and patterns, a series within a series that are recognizable as recurring elements. The work feels experimental resisting finality like suggestions or notes or indications of possibilities. Just as all things are impermanent, nothing is final, changes and adjustments can continually happen. I’m trying to create images that focus on knowledge about ourselves that is beyond words. Inherent knowledge that would be tedious to speak in words. People are not often willing to access this type of thought, and when they do it is often confusing, but none of us can escape the habit of projecting thoughts and concepts onto reality itself. Yet through awareness of our deeply ingrained conceptual biases, we can open new windows onto our minds.”

Artist Statement

“Most of this work was made in 2019 which visually explores how the mind interprets and appreciates, distorts and projects the images we perceive and the thoughts and emotions we struggle with. Focusing on abstract contemplative figurative images developed with the view that art can awaken us to the obscurations that cloud our mind from recognizing the clarity of awareness that is our inherent nature. With my experience of Tibetan Buddhist meditation, I use oil on paper or canvas, with collage to intimately describe how our active mind creates collages of thoughts and patterns, as in a dream. If we examine our thoughts, we can see they are fragmented, impressionable, and empty of solidity. None of us can avoid thoughts but through awareness of our pitfalls, beauty, strengths, and weaknesses we can open windows onto the mind. I’m interested in the study of how the mind works as a means of gaining insight into how we communicate, how we create an identity through form, emotions, and consciousness, and how we hide in that creation. Essentially this work is about all of us and the empty, clear and unconditional nature of mind we all have. I’ve exhibited my work throughout the U. S. including NYC, Long Island City, Brooklyn, California, Beijing, China as well as being included in several private collections in the U. S., Europe, and Asia.”



"Portrait of a Woman" Egon Schiele, Color lithograph, 5 1/2 x 3 1/2 in., 1910. Open source from The Met.

## Karina and the Total Dick Move

*Eva Olivier*

“What are you stupid?”

Karina couldn’t believe Brie. After every-fucking-thing, her roommate was not only still with Elias, she wanted Karina to hang out at his house like nothing had happened.

“Cam’s going,” was Brie’s only response. It was April and she was dolled up like a Times Square New Year’s — golden hair panached up in some stolen YouTube-DIY crown, fake lashes concealed by too much eye shadow, a shimmery dress whose sleeves barely hid the black fingermarks bruising her bicep.

Karina should have expected this. She’d wanted to call the cops, but Brie refused, insisted the whole thing was an accident. Karina figured pressing charges would have useless anyhow. ‘Elias is such an upstanding young gentleman,’ the chauvinist administrators and judges would say, ‘what with his Senator father and his family that pays off large cash donations to our university.’ The little shit was free to do as he pleased, evidence marking Brie’s arm be damned.

Over the past few days, Karina’s twisted mind stewed with nasty alternatives for revenge. One stood out from the rest. Her fingers itched with intent.

Still, she couldn’t believe what Brie was asking her.

“Cam really agreed to this?”

“With enthusiasm.” Brie beamed a set of freshly bleached teeth. “I mean, it’s not like you had plans, right?”

Karina did have plans. They weren’t the going out and getting-a-fuck kind, but rather the drink-some-wine-and-study-my-lines variety, which suited her way more fine than spending an evening fending off the advances of Elias’ juvenile roommates. No thanks, bruh. She had real things to do. She earned the lead in this fucking play, and, farce or not, she was going to kill it— show everyone why she’d earned that full scholarship. Brie, BU’s basic-bitch rich-girl, paid the \$60-k yearly toll in full and had one line. Five words. Three scenes. Karina, daughter of a Queens’ cop was the last Queen of Fucking Egypt.

As Karina walked to Cam’s room, the tingling in her hands prickled through the rest of her body. It wasn’t just the nicotine withdrawal kicking in, the after effects of making that stupid promise to Cam that she’d quit while they played Queen and consort. It was the other, unspoken vice. It’d been weeks since her little excursion with the boots. When she noticed them tucked away in her bag she told herself she was simply keeping pace with the trust fund babies. And the boots were devastatingly awesome—black, chunky-chic, ass-kickers with a three-inch heel that let her tower above everyone else.

But the itch — it came on full force now that she had an opportunity for retribution: Elias’

heirloom ring. Brie said it meant a lot to him, a gift from the dickwad’s mother, passed down for generations, etcetera, etcetera, a jewel-flecked golden circlet band—an accessory for a Pharaoh, perhaps. And Jupiter knew Elias’ family was loaded enough to be royalty. He never wore the ring—probably too big for his tiny fingers. Left it lying around on his bureau, Brie said. Which meant it was primed for Karina to easily pop in and get some measure of revenge.

Cam stood in front of her mirror, futzing with how off-the-rack-janky her three hundred dollar Givenchy top should hang. Karina loved Cam. She was a wonderful scene partner and more than willing to share her expensive clothes and makeup. But her ridiculous displays of wealth sometimes made Karina want to vomit.

Cam caught Karina’s sour look. “Ooooohlala. What a sexy bitch.”

“You know you want me, Antonia.” Karina glanced at her own reflection. Her lips puckered tight like she was sucking a cigarette, a look that might’ve been erotic if she wasn’t so worked up. She eased into an effortless smile that masked the giddy fury bubbling inside her.

“How can I resist you, my desert jewel?” Cam recited. “There’s not a minute of our lives that should stretch without some pleasure now.” She held Karina about the waist and Karina coiled her hands around the nape of Cam’s neck. They fell into their routine, twirling and spinning until they stood face-to-face, building up to a kiss that would never come.

“What sport tonight?” Cam continued.

Shakespeare’s words and Karina’s own intentions battled for position on the tip of her tongue. Her expression fell back into the accustomed sourball purse. Fuck it.

“I can’t believe you agreed to this,” Karina said.

“What do you mean, I agreed?” Cam’s geniality swung indignant. “Brie said you wanted to go.”

Oh, fuck that manipulative bitch. Cam shook her head and Karina sensed her other half was thinking the same thing: Brie knew that they’d never let her go back to Elias’ alone.

“Fake drunk?” Karina asked.

“Fake drunk,” Cam agreed. “Back by midnight.”

“Or we’ll turn all those pricks into pumpkins.”

Karina passed Brie in the hallway.

“Aren’t you ready yet?” Brie downed a glass of wine, obviously psyching herself up for something she wasn’t ready to face. Karina thought of tying her roommate down and never letting her out of the apartment again.

Instead, Karina smiled and said, “Brie, I love you and I’ll follow you to the near ends of the earth. I just want to reiterate that if I had the chance, I’d floor your boyfriend’s Maserati right up his dick-hole.”

\* \* \*

The Brighton Victorian was a frat house in all but official campus designation, the reek of stale beer and shit weed soaked into its ancient floorboards. Only three of Elias’ umpteen roommates were home, annoying fucks named Marco, Jin and Trent who buzzed around Karina and Cam with misplaced hopes of getting laid.

Karina perched on the edge of a stained couch and pretended to sip her beer. Across the dimly lit room, a half-wasted Brie snuggled up with Elias. Karina had to admit he was pretty gorgeous, but a prick was still a prick — no matter how good it looked, it’d still blast you in the eye when you least expected it. Karina forced herself not to scowl as Elias wrapped an arm around Brie and boasted about his family’s beach house on the Outer Banks.

“It’s pretty chill,” Elias fingered a gold chain around his neck. “We’d have these huge barbeques, then we’d build a fire and everyone’d lay out on the beach. My mom loved watching the sun rise out over the ocean.”

He paused for a moment, and Karina figured he was waiting for some comment about how awesome everything sounded and sweet-ass it would be to visit. But no one replied and the mood sombered and Karina thought Elias’ roommates must be bored of his shtick too.

Marco perked up a moment later. “Dude, I can’t wait. This summer’s gonna own. I’ll show you all what real wave-tossing is.”

“No way, bro,” Jin said.

Marco hopped off the couch and mimed what Karina supposed was surfing. “You don’t even know. Me and Elias are gonna Tear. It. Up. N.C. and Cali together at last.”

“Yeah, man.” Elias bumped fists with Marco and spread his too-perfect surfer smile across the room. “You ladies are welcome to join us. There’s more than enough room. Plus my dad’s way too busy this summer to come down.”

“Oh yeah, no adults!” Marco practically woo’d right there.

Karina stifled a laugh. It was too much: the idiots egging each other on while alpha-dog Elias lapped up the attention. She couldn’t comprehend what Brie saw in such a shit-spewing asshole.

“Fuck yeah.” Brie launched her fist out for a bump, missed Elias’ knuckle and nearly knocked him in the eye. Cam laughed and this time Karina couldn’t help but do the same.

“You okay?” cried Brie. Karina immistakably heard a twinge of fear in her roommate’s voice. “I’m — I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t worry, babe.” Elias laughed like it was nothing. “You totally missed.”

He pulled at the gold chain around his neck and Karina figured he was fighting not to lose his cool. Elias’ wrapped his arm back around Brie and kissed her on the cheek. Within moments their tongues were snaking down each other’s throats.

That was Karina’s cue to rock. Her fingers stretched and flexed in anticipation. All she needed to do was fly upstairs, grab the ring, and float back down before anyone even remembered she’d left.

“Get a load of those lovebirds.” Marco slapped Karina on the knee. She tried to shift away, but his manspreading had already squeezed her against the arm of the couch. She crossed her legs to clear some space and her boot whacked her beer to the floor.

“Shit,” Karina stood up.

“I’ll get a towel,” Marco nearly pushed her over as he ran into the kitchen.

“Jesus, K,” Brie frowned.

“Chill. It’s not like she did it on purpose.” Elias smiled like it was no big thing, but his eyes held a malevolence that stung Karina like fast-acting poison. He fidgeted with the gold chain again and murmured something into Brie’s ear. She laughed and grinned like Medea before the woman finally came to her senses and discovered Jason was an über asshole.

Marco returned with paper towels and a six-pack. He cracked a can open and handed it to Karina. She almost downed it before realizing what she was doing. She sat back down and her impatient fingers crumpled the sides of the can.

“Cam?” Marco cracked another beer and handed it across the table. Cam took a long sip and flashed Karina a conspiratorial smile. The bleary, unfocused look in Cam’s eyes made Karina wonder if her partner had forgotten they were only playing drunk.

“We shouldn’t,” Brie giggled.

Elias was all up on her. His forehead glistened with sweat. Urgent fingers unbuttoned the top of his shirt as he kissed Brie’s neck. Karina thought she heard the words “my room” and knew she saw Brie tense as Elias’ hands roamed over her roommate’s bruised arm.

Brie’s eyes latched onto Karina’s, and for an instant Karina thought she was about to witness a reenactment of what happened last weekend. Then Brie laughed and brought her fingers to her lips and mimed smoking. Karina nodded. Karina wasn’t sure exactly what was going on, but she’d be a good roommate. She’d hang out with Brie. She wouldn’t resist.

“No, no, no.” Cam jumped up, fingers pointing every-which-way at Karina. “You quit. You swore you quit.”

“Whatever.” Karina wanted to throw Cam’s own false promises right back at her but Karina held her tongue.

Brie shrugged and Elias led her out of the room. They paused at the stairs for a long second before finally heading toward the back of the house.

Karina’s twitchy fingers dug into her palms. She’d give it two more minutes, that’s it.

“Is it true?” Marco asked her. His knee rubbed up against Karina’s once again.

“Lots of things are true.” Karina edged away from him. “But whatever you’re thinking of — probably not.”

“Cam says you guys are doing an all-female version of some play.”

“Antonia and Cleopatra,” Cam laughed.

“You mean Antony and Cleopatra,” corrected Jin.

“Not anymore,” Karina smiled. “No dicks allowed.”

“Isn’t that a romance?” Jin asked.

A devious smile passed between the three boys.

“It’s a tragedy,” Karina said.

“And a history,” echoed Cam.

“But there’s kissing, right?” asked Jin.

Cam shrugged like she wasn’t sure, but her alcohol-stymied smile gave away the answer. The boys giggled like ten year olds seeing their first pair of boobs.

“I think they want us to practice.” Cam laughed.

Karina burned like hot oil. How had Cam gotten this fucking wasted? No way Karina could leave her here alone with these horn toads. At least not all mushy eyed and feeling fine.

“So, you guys are all still accounting majors, huh?” Karina took a fake sip of her full beer. “How’s that boring you?”



“We’ll be rolling in the dough by the time we graduate,” Trent replied.

“More useful than being a drama major,” Jin said.

And like that it was on. Cam stood up and defended her career in a half-drunk monologue that Edward Albee couldn’t have written better. She wouldn’t let Jin or Trent get a word in edgewise and when she finally did stop for a breath she said, “Right, K?”

“Without a doubt,” Karina smiled. “I’ll be right back. Too much beer.”

“I’ll show you where the bathroom is,” Marco stood up with her.

“I know where it is. I’ve been here before.” Karina brushed him away and drunk-waltzed toward the stairs. Cam continued on with her boner-draining rant and Karina took some solace in the fact that at least one of her roommates would be safe.

\* \* \*

Karina’s boots clonked up the steps. She had been right: they were devastating, devastatingly loud. She wrenched them off as she thudded onto the second floor landing. The bathroom and its urine splashed toilet seat lingered on her right; Elias’s sealed bedroom waited to the left. She had a clear runway. All she needed to do was take five steps and open the door.

Brie’s laugh sounded from somewhere below. It surprised Karina that they were already back inside. She should see what Brie was up to, in case something malevolent was going on. Karina: just a caring friend popping in at the right time, capturing a Janus-faced shithead about to rough up her roommate. Karina: heroine, champion, and taker-down of rich fuckwads. A great triumph. It might be better than smokes. It may even be more satisfying than the ring.

But her impatient fingers had already clasped the door handle. The knob refused to turn, locked by a cheap single tumbler she could probably kick in if she still had her boots on. She removed a felt pouch from the inside of her purse, unfurled it and decided upon two of the finer metal spindles. With practiced dexterity, Karina inserted the picks into the keyhole and popped the door open.

She flipped on the room’s overhead light and left the door ajar, as if she just so happened to drunkenly stumble in. A wood-framed mirror was adorned with photos of Elias and an older woman. Presumably this was the much-vaunted mother who had bequeathed her ungrateful son the heirloom ring, the lustrous band that was supposed to be discarded on the bureau but was currently nowhere to be seen. Karina dropped her shoes to the floor and dug through Elias’ man-clutter, awful-smelling colognes and face creams, tangles of ear bud wires, a cracked water pipe. She considered that Brie had pulled a fast one, made the whole momma’s-boy thing up in some feeble attempt to put a glittery shine on her gremlin boyfriend. Karina rummaged through the wool socks and silk briefs that filled the bureau’s top drawer, tossing aside condoms and bags of weed and a box of stale cigarettes without catching a glimmer of the ring.

Footsteps pounded up the stairs. Karina’s fingers cast about for something to latch onto, found the box of cigs, threw one in her mouth, savored the dried nicotine, and fought the urge to light it. She snatched the weed for later and slammed the top drawer shut just as Elias walked in.

“What are you doing?” His forehead creased down the middle like a baboon’s ass.

Karina coquetted her lips into a smile and tossed the cigarette carton on the dresser. “I needed a smoke. You guys were—“ She noticed Elias’ shirt was clumsily buttoned and recalled Brie’s echoing laughter. “Doing something in the kitchen. Marco said you had some spares lying around.”

“Marco’s got a big mouth.” Elias frowned. “I thought you quit?”

“Only temporarily.” Karina held her practiced simper and bumble-strutted toward the door, trying to edge past Elias. His arms extended across the frame and cut her off, his muscled chest thrust out as if he were merely stretching. The top buttons on his shirt tumbled loose and his gold chain fell forward. The ring swung from the chain like a rusted pendant.

Karina almost blanched in disappointment. No wonder Elias didn’t wear it. Heirloom or not, it was a piece of shit. Not one fucking ounce of shining gold or precious stone adorned the tarnished band that dangled from Elias’ sinewy torso.

“How’d you get in?” Nasty accusation filled his voice. Karina tried to ignore it.

“What d’you mean how’d I get in?” She made sure to slur her words as she plucked her boots up off the floor. “I thought these’d be super comfortable, like what I paid for them. But they’re pretty awful.”

“I keep my room locked.”

“Huh. The door was wide open.” Karina pretended to struggle as she put her boots back on. Except....She actually couldn’t slip them on. Teetering on one leg, she grabbed the bureau and jammed her right foot inside the narrow shoe only for her heel to get stuck halfway. It was like her feet had gotten bigger or the leather had shrunk or — fuck these stupid shoes.

“I know you don’t like me.” He stepped toward her.

“Buulllllll-shit.” Karina fumbled the right boot on but failed to slip into the left. “Why’d — Why would I be here if I didn’t like you guys.”

“You think you’re queen bitch, don’t you?”

A smoldering rage lusted in his eyes and the smile shrank from Karina’s face. She was taller than him. She might be able to overpower him. Maybe. He pressed closer, forcing her to backup against the bureau. Her foot finally worked its way into her left shoe. She was suited up. She could take him. She readied herself.

His face was inches from hers.

“Dude, what the fuck?” Her voice cracked and the cigarette fell from her lips. “Come on, man, you made me drop it.”

“What were you doing in here?” He tightened his fist.

“I told you...I was...” She reached back blindly, feeling for the carton of cigs. Her fingers coiled around the water pipe. “Hey, you got any weed?”

“Fuck you. Get the fuck out of my house.”

Karina shattered the water pipe against Elias’ face before he could even think about touching her. She was a hair’s breadth from the doorway when he tackled her, one hand seizing her breast. He wrenched her torso as she clawed at his face and chest, ultimately smashing her knee into his tiny balls. He crumpled over and Karina stood up, ring in hand. She planted her feet and kicked forward, her awesome boots devastating his face, blasting him back into the bureau and crashing his manscaping shit to the floor. Blood gushed from Elias’ nose and he cried out, threatening to kill her, screaming for someone to call the cops. Karina flew out of the room, railroaded past Elias’ idiot roommates, yanked a tipsy Cam and manic Brie down the stairs, and escaped into the cool spring night.

\* \* \*

The cab dropped them back at the apartment well before the stroke of twelve.

Brie, drunker than an amateur on New Year's, curled up on her bed and sobbed into a pillow. Karina dropped the ring next to her.

“Where’d you get that?” Brie sniffled.

“Where do you think?” Karina could still feel the creep’s hand assaulting her breast. She hoped he’d left fingermarks, evidence to match up against the bruises on Brie’s arm. Karina thought of showing her roommate the truth about her wonderful boy-toy right then and there, but instead Brie said:

“I didn’t know he was such an asshole. What happened?”

“I was grabbing some cigs.” Karina shrugged. “It’s been a crazy week. Don’t tell Cam.”

“Tell Cam what?” Cam, still drunk, propped herself against the doorframe.

“That I was jonesing,” Karina said.

“You shit.” Cam frowned. “You selfish whore. Goodnight Brie.”

Cam stumbled down the hall. Karina wasn’t sure if she was serious or not. No, of course she wasn’t. Cam loved her. Besides, Cam was the one that had sunk too far into the role and actually gotten drunk. If anyone should be mad, it should be her, Karina.

She let it slide. Everything would be fine in the morning.

She returned her attention to Brie.

“I was really there because I was looking for you. I wanted to make sure you were okay.”

Karina rubbed a comforting hand on Brie’s shoulder. Brie shrugged her off and sat up.

“I was in the kitchen. You could have found me easily.” Brie gasped up a lungful of snot and tears. When she spoke again, her voice held a shocking firmness only surpassed by the anger brewing in her mascara-streaked eyes. “You shouldn’t have taken it.”

“I grabbed it by accident when he was attacking me.”

“You should have just dropped it.”

“I was fighting for my life.” Karina couldn’t figure out what Brie’s fucking problem was. If Brie didn’t want the ring, Karina’d take it. She’d shine it up a little, pawn it for a few dollars, buy some cigs, and smoke them sooner rather than later, promises to Cam be fucked.

Her wayward fingers danced toward the ring and she had to sit on her hand to stop them.

Brie didn’t seem to notice. “It was a gift from his mother.”

“Yeah, I remember you saying that. I’m sure if you told his mom how her bunghole son was treating women --”

“She’s dead.”

Karina caught the implication like a dagger to the heart. She was a total shit for nicking the funereal gift of a boy’s dead — No. Fuck guilt. She was more than justified. If Elias blubbered about it or punched a hole in his wall and broke his fist, so be it. He was still a total cocknave, dead mother or not.

Karina’s errant fingers snatched the ring and her heavy boots stomped toward the door. The cold metal felt soothing against her palm, worthless heirloom or not.

“Leave it.” Brie snapped.

Karina stopped. She didn’t want to, but her boots refused to carry her any further and she stood there, stupid. Her hand tightened around the ring.

“Leave it, Karina.” Brie’s tone softened. “Please. I won’t return it.”

But Karina knew she would. When Elias inevitably came calling, Brie would cave and they’d all end up back where they started. Her entire body tensed.

Fuck my life, Karina thought. She loosened her grip and let the ring clatter onto Brie’s makeup table.

“Thank you.” Brie turned her back to Karina and climbed under her comforter. “Turn off my light, will you?”

Karina lingered in the doorway, thinking over the order in her head, what it meant if she acquiesced, what it meant that fucking Brie of all people, a fucking servant with one line in the play, was giving her, fucking Cleopatra, orders. She didn’t deserve to be treated like this, especially by her fucking friends. Her booted foot thumped against the wooden floor.

Brie glared over her shoulder at Karina. Tears filled the blonde girl’s eyes. “And get rid of those hideous shoes; they’re too fucking loud.”

Karina wanted to smack Brie, tell her to go fuck herself. But it wasn’t worth it. Karina snapped the lights off as she exited the room. Everything will be fine again in the morning, she thought, her boots clonking down the hall in time with the echo of Brie’s sobs.

### About the Author

*Eva Olivier*

Eva Olivier is an independent multimedia artist that resides in New England. She used to do a bit of traveling around the country, for some mysterious reason that has been put on hold. Eva enjoys night skies, foggy mornings, dive bars, and things that never turn out like they seem.

### About the Work

"This story was written a while ago, and since then a lot of things have changed. Re-reading it, I have to ask myself and you: What is justice? Who determines it? What is truth? Who determines that? Is a sense of right all we need to make us feel like we're a good person? I'm not so certain anymore, and really, that's what I think this story is about."



*"Self-Portrait" Samuel Joseph Brown, Jr., watercolor, charcoal, and graphite on paper, 20 1/4 x 15 3/8 in., ca. 1941.*

## **Lucky Man**

*Thomas Maurstad*

Robert Fairchild was a signaturist, a term he coined after dismissing his agent's suggestion, signature stylist. Either way, his brand message was this: Robert Fairchild created signatures. He performed this service for anyone with both the desire to have a bespoke signature and the means to pay the immoderate sum he charged. Robert had yet to encounter a potential client for whom the first feature wasn't a direct consequence of the second, as all of them were successful players in the celebrity industry.

A lot of them were recent and on the rise, making the jump from internet sensation to multimedia star. A few were established, mid-career celebs seeking an upgrade. Then there were the book-tour-bound authors who came to him like corporations about to go public and in desperate need of a bankable logo. He had worked with a few politicians and a couple of pro athletes, but they were the exceptions. His core customers were freshly fused and varyingly amalgamated compounds of rich and famous. Robert had a name for them that reflected their signifying attributes; he called them "savages." Not to their faces, of course. Not to anyone, in fact, save his agent, Gillian -- "Gill...ee-yun, with a hard G," was how she introduced herself.

It had been Gillian with her hard G who conceived of Robert's improbable profession. Back then, she was yet another agent's assistant out and about on a Friday night, working her way through a smartphone list of events and locations, on the prowl for anyone or anything that stirred her future-heat sensor. She was making a reconnaissance sweep through a group show of unknown artists at a barely-there gallery when a cluster of panels in a back corner drew her in, made her stare. Five three-by-four rectangles of gessoed linen. Was that ink or acrylic? A closer look confirmed it was ink. Two were black, two were blue-black, one had some crimson bleeding through. The figures on each panel were sharp, slashing, calligraphic. She was still staring when she sensed a presence and turned her head to find a man standing just behind her left shoulder. He smiled. She nodded at the wall.

"Yours?" Gillian asked.

He nodded but said nothing.

"They look like tattoos by Picasso."

She really liked them. She and he talked. She really liked him, and he her. She gave him her card; he invited her to his studio in Inglewood, a one-room concrete box he had also lived in since moving from Dallas. A few days later, there she was at his door. In an uncharacteristic flourish of counter-frugality optimism, he had gone to the corner mercado the morning after their meeting, so he was able to play the well-provisioned host and offer her a cup of Costa Rican coffee, a bottle of Jamaican beer, or a glass of sparkling mineral water. Two snaps of a church key later, they were clinking their squat, brown bottles together in a toast to new friends and she commenced her survey of his cluttered but clean space. She was immediately drawn to a stack of sketches. Some were sharp scrawls -- jagged, severe, chopped. Some were soft-edged swirls --



swooped, sculpted, blobby. Some were simple and spare; some crazed and elaborate. They were all beautiful. They looked like signatures, she decided, written using letters she couldn't quite identify, in a language she'd never seen. But each of them provoked a vivid image of the "person" who had "signed" them.

She looked at them as he stood next to her, watching her look at them. She was still looking at the last of the cache when she quietly said, "They're like portraits."

He had quickly looked down while stuffing his hands in his pockets to keep himself from hugging her.

"They are portraits."

That had been the beginning and things took off with a whoosh from there, faster even than Gillian had predicted, in the way that always and only happens when someone comes up with an idea so ripe and ready, it bursts open like a thought everyone had already been thinking without realizing it.

"Think about it," Gillian had said a few nights after that first studio visit, while they waited for the bottle of rosé she ordered. Robert scanned the room -- he wasn't looking for famous faces, but he saw one and then another -- soaking in the decadent pleasures of sitting in the sort of buzzy upscale restaurant he hadn't been able to afford since moving to Los Angeles. Gillian continued the wind-up to her pitch.

"No one writes with pen and paper anymore. In school, they barely even teach 'penmanship' (she somehow pronounced the word so that it became a homonym with 'buggy whip'). For most people, it's just another thing, like trigonometry, you're never going to use in the real world. The signature is a leftover relic from another age. The only time anybody ever signs their name anymore is on a little screen, using a piece of plastic shaped like a pen."

Gillian paused as the waiter returned and presented a bottle for her approval, which she gave with a quick flick of her hand while never looking away from Robert.

"Here's the funny thing. As the signature is vanishing from everyday life, its celebrity counterpart, the autograph, is on fire in the marketplace."

Robert must have smirked at this pronouncement because Gillian nodded, let out a derisive snort, and grabbed her wine glass for a gulp.

"I know -- ridiculous. But I'm telling you, autographs are big business. More and more of our clients are being 'asked' (she leaned in conspiratorially as she uttered the word to emphasize its irony) to attend events that are just endless signing sessions. And wherever they go, there are as many autograph collectors now as paparazzi. And that's because autographs are a booming commodity in the celebrity-souvenir market.

Gillian paused to lock eyes with Robert, raising her eyebrows as she opened her palms to the

ceiling.

"It's like... having a, you know, really beautiful, refined signature is one of those things now, like perfect teeth, perfect skin, hair, body, clothes, all of it, that elevates someone, marks them as that much more special, rare, important.

Robert turned his nose to the heavens as he exclaimed with a hissing burst of breath.

"A star."

Another fuck-me snort, another gulp of wine.

"Exactly. That's the point. A unique, stylish, you know, 'cool' autograph is the new must-have celebrity accessory. And this is all happening at a time when nobody under the age of my grandmother knows how to sign their name in a way that doesn't look like the signature of a five-year-old.

Gillian performed another conspiratorial lean as she lowered her voice to a dramatic murmur.

"You would be shocked how many" -- her scan quickly helicoptered the room -- "major players sign their names like chimps."

Robert refilled their glasses as she presented her vision for his future: He would become a signature stylist to the stars. She assured him that just among her agency's stable of clients, he would be certain to have enough work to keep him busy for the next two years during which time, not incidentally, he would make, based on his career thus far, at least two lifetimes-worth of income. And once established -- Gillian had already blocked out a preliminary line-up of projects to maximize the contagion effect of his work -- she assured him that his phone, and by his phone she meant her phone, wouldn't stop ringing. She raised her glass to punctuate her spiel and offered a powerfully persuasive two-syllable summation.

"Ka-ching."

This was Gillian's sales pitch, which was true. There was also the unspoken reason behind it, which was the truth. The return to autographs wasn't a fluke; it was a deliberate scheme, part of Hollywood's anti-selfie campaign, with Gillian's agency leading the charge. Selfies were a disruption of the natural order, representing a democratizing loss of control, an inversion of power between celebrities and civilians. Selfies in their spontaneous intimacy -- the sweaty embrace, the beery breath, the arm-in-arm/cheek-to-cheekness of it all -- transformed the civilian interloper into photographer/director/co-star/distributor while the set-upon celebrity was demoted to mere stage prop. Like a flash flood, the proliferation of "celfies" as the primary interaction between celebrities and fans seemed to happen overnight, carving a new, unstable and unwelcome ravine through the landscape. The initial response from the various industry players had been to go along, to present an accommodating front to the evolving technology of adulation. But accommodation had devolved into unworkable appeasement, as civilians became more emboldened, celebrities more resentful, and the money guard more fretful over the

corrosive (and potentially profits-impinging) effects of an ever-expanding and unregulated reservoir of digital images. Autographs had been settled on as bulwark, deflection and consolation, providing a ‘no’ wrapped in a ‘yes.’

Robert hadn’t known any of this then and if Gillian had explained it to him, he wouldn’t have cared. All he knew was that he was tired of being a starving artist and here was someone smart and connected praising his talent and offering an opportunity. He briefly considered going over the reasons why it wasn’t the prospect of making a ka-ching’s worth of money that made Gillian’s offer so appealing, but he just as quickly scotched the impulse. It was the money, and so what if it was? He’d suffered in spartan obscurity long enough; he had earned an upgrade. He gave his assent with a smile and a nod; they marked the launch of their new venture with a toast, followed by several more.

Gillian had assumed some sort of penmanship tutor would be a necessary component of the signature stylist experience, a chef to execute the nutritionist’s dietary scheme, but Robert brushed aside that notion. For workshopping purposes, Gillian played the role of The Client and Robert wasted no time as he introduced himself, asked a few chitchat questions, and explained that for their work together to succeed she would need to be as relaxed and open as possible. He offered some green tea, they sat in facing folding chairs, and he began -- gently, calmly, but earnestly -- to ask questions about her career, her childhood, her hopes, her regrets. It was a surreal experience, floating somewhere between therapy session and job interview.

They had agreed to use Gillian’s name (Gillian Lawson) for this test run, in part because Robert loved the capital ‘G’ and held the series of letters ‘i-l-l-i’ to be one of the most beautiful sequences in calligraphy, but also because ever since he had watched her sign her name at the restaurant that first night, he teased her mercilessly about her remedial scrawl.

“Look at it,” he had said in mock horror after snatching up the credit-card receipt to hold it under his nose as Gillian lunged in vain to stop him. “What a colossal misfire. Such an abdication of self, this generic spritz of dashes and dots. Why don’t you just get “I give up” tattooed on your forehead?”

The instant she saw “her” new signature, she knew she had been right about him. It was sleek, sculpted, sophisticated. It began with his beloved capital ‘G’ -- he had used an uppercase print rendition of the letter rather than going cursive. It looked like a cartoon sketch of a human ear; the word “cute” popped into Gillian’s as if someone had just whispered it. The rest of her first name seemed to be skipping into that ear like a string of musical notes. The capital L that started Lawson likewise forsook the loopiness of its cursive form. This signature wasn’t at all swirly or decorous. It was straightforward. It looked smart, in two shades of the adjective, and as Gillian smiled to herself at that thought, she realized this was, in fact, *her* signature. Robert had created a portrait of her.

Gillian hadn’t known what to expect when Robert switched gears and put a pen in her hand, set a blank pad before her, and began his tutorial. Flashbacks of a third-grade teacher looming over Gillian’s desk while growling “no, no, no, bring your loops up and over” smeared into her dad flinching in the passenger seat while mashing his foot on a phantom brake pedal and screeching

orders as she clenched the steering wheel and strained not to cry. She had been dreading this part. But if Robert noticed (he did), he didn’t let on as he crooned his instructions.

“Don’t think of it as writing. Think of it as drawing. Forget the letters. Just see them as shapes. Focus on the shapes. Let’s break it down, one shape at a time. Once you’re comfortable with one, try the next. After that, we’ll work on connecting them. It’s easy, you’ll see.”

She had started with stiff, jerky motions, clutching the pen in a skeleton claw, scratching out marks that in no way resembled Robert’s smooth flowing lines. After a few more spasmodic squiggles, her “signature” looked like the peaks and plunges of a polygraph exam she was failing, miserably. Robert, standing just behind her, watching, emitted a single, soft cluck of his tongue as he rubbed her shoulder with one hand and pried the pen from her clutch with the other.

“Relax. Let’s start over. Take the pen and hold it like it’s a living thing. A living thing you’re trying not to choke the living shit out of” (he gently patted her shoulder as a tactile laugh track). “Now we’re just going to make shapes, whatever you want, circles, loops, waves, lines, whatever. And as you do, I want you to move the pen across the paper lightly. Soft and smooth. Steady. How do you touch a lover when you’re trying to arouse her? That’s what I want you to do. Tease the paper, awaken its desire for your sweet ink.”

In her head, Gillian wanted to laugh and unleash the dogs of snark, but before she had the chance, she saw her hand jetting across the white paper, up and down and over and around, a fluid contrail of black streaming from the pen; even more, she felt it, a liquid slipperiness, like the final swells of surf lapping at the sand.

“There you go, that’s better. Feel the flow, stay with it.”

Then and there, Gillian let go and gave herself over to his croon and her flow, and somewhere between the two, any shapes segued into his shapes, into her shapes, and then this shape was connecting with that shape and the next and the next. Two into three unnoticed hours later, she brought up her hand with a triumphant swoosh from what had become a field of evermore graceful signatures -- “her” signature now fully her signature. She turned her head to gaze over her shoulder at Robert and share an expression of jubilant disbelief, but he wasn’t there. In that same moment, she heard a pop coming from behind her other shoulder and turned that way to see Robert holding a bottle and two glasses.

This had been the beginning of a beautiful friendship; moreover, an exceedingly profitable one. Now, with the five-year anniversary of that beginning just around the corner, Gillian was an agent in full with an enviable roster of clients and plans to open her own boutique agency. And Robert was the Signaturist to the stars, living in a concrete-and-glass parallelogram cantilevered on a hill above Sunset Boulevard, purchased in a sweetheart deal from one of Gillian’s other clients, a celebrity chef moving to Las Vegas, the new center of his dining-theme-park empire.

Robert was on the cusp of ascending to the next ring of success: the roll-out of his book, *Make Your Mark: Sign Like a Star*. No longer an anonymous cog in the Celebrity Machine, he was out and had been ever since one of his clients, his first A-lister, a grand doyenne with a bandolier of

statuettes, had broken protocol and sung his praises during a run of interviews and appearances. She loved her new signature, of course, but even more the process of discovering it, “the journey” by which the two of them had “blazed a trail through the wilderness of my soul.” It had been “the most intense act of self-discovery” she had ever experienced, “not just as an actor, but as a human being.” Robert’s response had been a wisecrack delivered in his best Bogart -- “the glitzier the dame, the gaudier the patter.” In contrast, Gillian’s response had been full-on panic. At first. But as the subsequent boil of media queries, peer congratulations and, most persuasively, new-client requests quickly confirmed, this was a coup not a disaster, and her bushwhacked horror shifted seamlessly into poised elation. Robert completed their role reversal by feeling a prickly ambivalence that sharpened into something darker and more distressed when an exultant Gillian rushed over with the good news that the bad news was, in fact, great news. He had surprised himself when, instinctively, he chose not to share his reaction with her.

He still hadn’t. Robert shuffled out onto his patio, into the late-morning light, plopped himself in one of the low-slung deck chairs, and raised the tumbler of Tabasco-spritzed tomato juice to his forehead. After pausing to extend a pinkie and press his sunglasses higher up on his nose, he dragged the glass across his brow, hoping its slick chill would dampen the headache roaring behind his eyes. He stared at the infinity pool, letting his gaze go soft as he tried to remember the last time he had dipped so much as a toe in it. He didn’t try too hard, and with only blanks-pocked success -- sometime soon after moving in, another lost night.

He drained his glass as he inventoried his upcoming schedule: He left for New York a week from tomorrow for a blitzkrieg of television appearances, interviews and photo shoots, beginning with a sweet-spot appearance on the Today show and ending with a photo/interview session for a People Online feature, pitched to Gillian as “The Phantom Behind the Pen.” Gillian was negotiating terms for a series of instructional videos, then there was the book tour schedule to finalize; she was already fielding early prods from the publisher about a follow-up, maybe a memoir; and most immediately, there was his initial meeting with a new “mystery” client, which would be in -- he closed his eyes and let his head fall back as he drew in a deep breath -- about an hour. Fuck. Everything was great, so why was he awash in dread? He was on top of the world, so why did he feel crushed by it? He looked again at his azure pool, admired the clean, precise lines of his landscape, scanned the downhill vista of west Hollywood and chuckled over his great good fortune: He was tucked-in and fancy-free. He was the luckiest man alive. So why did he feel cursed?

Five years – a long time, the blink of an eye. What had he told himself, and Gillian, when they started all this?

“I’ll do it. But only for a couple of years, just long enough to save up some money. Then I’m going to move back to the middle of nowhere Texas, maybe Marfa, or Alpine. Make my life as small as I can. Get up every day and work. My work. Have the same day every day, over and over again, until... for as long as I can.”

The look on Gillian’s face -- she hadn’t laughed outright, but only by the merest technicality. It never occurred to her to mask her scornful amusement at his dipshit pronouncement. She just shook her head.

Two years came and went, of course. Then three, four, and now it was about to be five. Robert looked down at his fingers curled around the tumbler as he silently ticked off this countdown, and as he did he had the sudden, odd sensation of sitting outside himself as words flitted through his head like graffiti viewed through a train window: ‘I’m making my life big as I can.’ And then he was back within himself, still staring down at the hand holding the empty glass. He had not only broken his solemn pledge, he was devotedly, industriously enacting its opposite. Why? He got up and shuffled back into the house as a way of making it easier to pretend not to notice that he didn’t answer.

Khaki canvas shoes, ecru cotton pants, unpleated and rolled up just above his ankles, a white singlet under a white Oxford shirt, untucked, sleeves rolled up just past his elbows -- Robert thought of this outfit as his uniform and wore it for every first meeting with a new client. He glanced at his phone and saw he still had about 20 minutes, if this appointment was on time, which was, in his experience, unlikely, so he stepped into his studio and over to his drawing table. He stared down at the six sketches covering its surface, each a blue-black ink figure on a large sheet of drawing paper, arranged in two rows of three like giant mahjong tiles. They were new; he had only started working on them last week, the first new work he had produced in... a while.

His eyes scanned slowly from one to the next, from left to right, first the top three, then the bottom. They were studies, notes to himself about an image-idea that wouldn’t leave him alone until he got it out. He gathered up five of them as he continued to stare at the remaining sketch, which was the first one he’d drawn. These others, he now saw clearly, were ever-paler iterations of the image-idea he’d been trying capture; they moved farther away not closer. He dropped them on the floor beneath the table as he continued studying the remaining figure. He liked it, and he hardly ever liked anything he did. Not so much *it*, exactly, as the excitement looking at it stirred in him, the wheels set spinning, the possibilities beckoning just beyond, if only he would follow. He picked up the drawing, held it in both hands, stretched out his arms as if trying to bring some fine print into focus. He rotated the sheet, clockwise, from horizontal to vertical, vertical to horizontal, so that his drawing performed an intermittent cartwheel. Another swell of excitement pumped through his chest. He could feel the ideas, like train cars, lining up and clicking together, ready to be pulled out into the light.

Robert remembered this feeling in the same instant he realized how long it had been since he’d felt it. Chasing after this feeling was how he had ended up in a dingy studio in Inglewood, fifteen hundred miles closer to the world he’d moved from Texas to inhabit and still a million miles away. The waves of long-gone excitement surged and crashed against the sheer face of his newborn dread. He wanted to close the studio door, shut himself in and everything else out, chase after this image-idea until he caught it, lashed it down, made it his. But, he reminded himself, he couldn’t. Not right now. Later. Right now, he had to get ready, do all the things, the work, that had brought him to this well-appointed point.

“Living the life I’ve always wanted to live.”

He didn’t say it out loud, just in his head, as a playful tease, but instead the phrase jolted him like

a tattoo he didn't remember getting, and now Robert flashed on the film clip to a news story he'd seen yesterday:

A luxury apartment complex teetering atop an eroding cliff, somewhere up the coast. El Nino-charged waves pulverized the cliff's base as, again and again, huge scabs of earth sloughed off the side and crashed into the relentless surf. The cliff's edge was creeping closer and closer to the idyllic and doomed apartment building. It was just a matter of time.

There was a knock at the door, five sharp raps in an unmistakable, dash/dot-dot/dash/dash syncopation. Robert mumbled a curse, laid the drawing down and hurried out, leaving the studio door open. Another round of the five-rap knock resounded as he stepped up to the entrance. He paused, grimaced, exhaled, shimmied his shoulders, and opened the door. Robert was confronted by a young man, slightly shorter than Robert's 5'10" -- tall by celebrity standards. He had a mop of hair so precisely haphazard, it appeared designed by Frank Gehry, while the depth and variety of its shades made each strand seem individually tinted. He wore an oversized, black, blank basketball jersey, all the better to show off the sleeve-and-a-half's worth of tattoos covering his arms. He didn't look at Robert, but rather past him, which saved Robert the bother of masking the repugnance that flared in his eyes in that instant of recognition. He pasted a welcoming smile over a stifled groan and reached up to give the opened door two quick, sharp knocks -- the rhythmic punchline to his visitor's set-up.

If the young man appreciated or even recognized Robert's response to his call, his distracted airs offered no sign. He continued to stand mute, looking past Robert. Robert let out a slight, dry chuckle and tried again, knock-knock, while softly chanting "two... bits."

Now the young man did look at him, then leaned in as he did this exaggerated bug-eyed sneer thing with his peach-fuzz face.

"What? What's that? Two bits? Two bits of what?"

Then he laughed at his own joke as he swiped the back of one hand across his nostrils. Robert experienced a nano-coma, not moving, not thinking, and then was snapped back to consciousness by the image of throttling Gillian when next he saw her. He reapplied the smile to his face as he tried again.

"I was just finishing your knock. You know, the old routine," muttering in a little sing-song improv, "shave-and-a-hair-cut/two-bits."

The dead stare from his visitor caused Robert to instantly regret his performance. The young man passed a hand through that wondrous hair and let out a laughless chuckle while slowly looking Robert up and down before he resumed looking past him as he started talking past him, too.

"That's the beat of my new single. Just dropped last week. Blowing up. It's everywhere. That's probably where you heard it. It's so everywhere, you probably didn't even know you knew it."

To prove his point, he reached up again and repeated his five-rap knock, this time adding an

adenoidal croon -- "Bay Bee don't cool down." Robert experienced another nano-coma of blank-faced stupefaction, which the illustrated cherub interpreted as awe-struck gratitude. As a reward, he generously dropped the cherry on top of his impromptu gift, adding a concluding knock-knock as he grunted, "Heat up." Then he broke into the half-cocked grin that had conquered an international army of tweens.

"Yeah, you recognize it now. I told you. 'Heat Up.' That's my beat. It's number one. Everywhere." He flared his fingers in a simulation of bombs bursting in air.

Robert managed to regain his game-face grin and nodded.

"Yes, well, anyway, I'm Robert Fairchild and you are, of course, Tristan Shane." Robert turned himself sideways in the doorway and swept a hand back into the house. "Come in. Welcome."

Instead, Tristan Shane turned his back to Robert and made a flat-palmed pressing motion to a gleaming SUV purring by the curb. Now that he saw it, Robert couldn't believe he hadn't noticed this disco-ball tank the moment he opened door; if a dirigible had been tethered to his mail box, it wouldn't have appeared any more conspicuous. The pearlescent platinum beast hunkered on hula-hoop wheels of black metal honeycomb, which complemented the massive windows' impenetrable tint. Robert felt more than heard the dampened thuds of whatever music was blasting within. The man-child 180'd to once again face Robert without bothering to look at him.

"My boys. My manager said you work one-on-one, so they're just gonna wait out here. S'cool."

And with that, he slid past Robert and zipped into the house. He stopped in the middle of the floor, a low-slung sitting arrangement to his left, the work station of a table and two facing chairs to his immediate right, with the dining area and open kitchen beyond. Hands on his hips, he swept his gaze around as Robert shut the door and followed him in. He started to offer Tristan something to drink, but didn't get the words out in time.

"Nice spread. Who'd'ya use?"

Robert offered the name of a top-tier designer (another of Gillian's clients) and was about to tell his go-to anecdote about how this designer had won him over when, as he was describing the styles of furniture he admired, she had interrupted him to say, "don't tell me what you want your house to look like, tell me how you want it to feel." But, again, Tristan Shane cut in.

"Yeah, sure. I worked with her for a minute."

He gave the interior another scan, and added another back-of-the-hand nostrils swipe.

"She couldn't get my thing, what I was going for."

While trying to form the most neutral response he could muster, Robert watched as Tristan Shane began to wander, briefly pausing before the large abstract painting that had been a gift from a South Korea-born artist that Robert met soon after moving into his Inglewood studio -- his first



L.A. friend! She had since caught fire and recently been included in the “New Not New School” exhibit at LACMA. He really had meant to attend the opening-night festivities, and to offer her his warmest congratulations. But he didn’t, and he still hadn’t.

His free-range guest drifted over to the built-in shelves to run his fingers across the spines of artist monograms and first editions. He then picked up and peered through a mottled brass, 19th-Century kaleidoscope, set it down rather too heavily and not at all where it had been, poked at the cluster of vintage casino dice, leaned in to leer at a couple of surrealist photos, straightened, spun around, spied the display of ornately enameled antique pens and made a beeline. Robert cut him off at the ottoman with three quick sidesteps.

“What do you say we sit down and get to work? I know your time is limited.”

Another laughless snicker; another bug-eyed sneer.

“S’cool. I don’t feel like sitting. Anyways, I’m not here to...” He lost interest in this sentence before completing it and instead wanly waved a hand. “My manager said you wanted to meet me, so here I am. Now, you just do what you do and we’ll be all good.”

Tristan Shane dipped a shoulder as he prepared to step past Robert, but Robert moved with him to continue obstructing his path and, as he did, realized he had brought up a hand with the reflexive intent to place his palm against the young man’s chest -- at best an impolitic gesture, with the potential to be much worse. He tried to salvage the moment by clumsily redirecting the offending hand into an over-the-shoulder, pritheee-come-follow gesture, but abandoned this folly and let his hand, his gaze, and his voice drop as he tried once more.

“It’s not that I wanted to meet you. I mean, it’s not just that. I need to get a sense of... you. Who you are, who you want to be, so I can come up with a signature that captures that... you, and reflects it back to the world.”

Then came the look, the expression on Tristan Shane’s still baby-soft face. It wasn’t, as it had been until now, a shifting portrait of annoyance, dismissal, and boredom. Now, it was just one sentiment, simple and absolute. Pity. And then came the punk-shit pop boy’s first (and only) genuine guffaw, which added another yet more terrible dimension to the look. Amused pity.

The boy-king shook his head as he concluded his chuckle and flipped one of his hands at Robert as if waving off a waiter.

“Nah, nah, fuck all that. All you need to know is...” He paused a beat measured by a breath. “Cool, strong, sexy.”

He recited these words at a remedial pace, as if repeating the alphabet to a slow learner.

“That’s it. All you need.” More finger fireworks.

“That’s not how it works. That’s not how I work.”

Were Robert’s eyes closed as he said this? He couldn’t be sure because, while speaking, he was fixed on the inward image of himself braced against a fire door, straining to keep it shut as his anger raged on the other side, desperate to burst through and set the room ablaze. He succeeded insofar as his voice stayed calm, even conversational, but the effort required had caused his head to droop, and when he brought his gaze back up, Robert discovered that his guest was no longer in front of him. He wheeled around and, sure enough, Tristan Shane had just pulled up in front of the white porcelain platter on which the antique pens were displayed. The boy-king’s eager fingers twitched in anticipation of handling the cool, lacquered weight of presumably each and every one.

“Stop! Don’t touch those!”

Nothing calm or conversational about that. He tried to gulp back his frenzy. Now it was his turn to serve up a laughless chuckle.

“Sorry.” Another swallow to unclench his jaw muscles. “I just don’t like anyone...” His voice fell as he concluded... “touching my stuff.”

Tristan Shane, back still to Robert, delivered a one-eyed glare from his half-turned head as he raised his hands as if responding to an arresting officer’s command. He held himself in that pose for what felt to Robert like an endless, awful moment during which Robert remained mute as he ran through opposing scenarios: one in which he wheedled his unwilling client into some kind of workable compliance, and one in which he charged over, grabbed Mr. CoolStrongSexy by the scruff of the neck and bounced him out the door. Robert knew which he should choose, but lingered on immediate gratification over future reward. “Good right now would feel so good right now.” He silently, slowly stretched the phrase across his tongue, squeezing each word like fingers running down a strand of prayer beads. Tristan Shane dropped his hands, issued a loud snort, rolled his eyes, brought his flared fingers back up and slackened his mouth in a garish mask of mock remorse.

“Chill.”

Another backhanded swipe of his nose. Another mirthless leer. He turned to step away from the display, but as he did he raised a hand, extended its index finger and, as if operating a construction crane, slowly swung his inked forearm over the porcelain platter and lowered his hand until his fingertip made contact with one of the pens. He tap-tap-tapped it a few times, withdrew the offending finger, spun around, stared at Robert for a fixed instant, and then shrugged his boyish shoulders.

“Oops.”

He walked back over, stood in front of Robert, and struck a pose -- one thumb slung in a hip pocket as his other hand raked through that godstruck hair so that it fell in a flaxen tumble just so across his peerless brow. He emitted a breathy titter. It trailed into a shy-sly grin as he dropped his head and then turned his abruptly angelic face up to gaze, searchingly, at Robert who stood

statue-still as he marveled at this silky, practiced performance. Tristan Shane clapped his hands together to mark the end of the scene, and spoke.

“That’s it, that’s all. I’m not some safe you need to crack. There’s no secret stash. My manager was supposed to have explained all this to...” he drifted off, uncertain of how to conclude “...whoever.” He brushed his hands together and then away from each other as a punctuating gesture.

He resumed his wanderings while Robert, with a small, sagging sigh, adopted the vigor and command of a scarecrow. Surrender. A sure end. All at once, the cresting wave of Robert’s anger didn’t just break and recede; it vanished like a heat mirage, leaving him weightless, a ghost in his own house. Without realizing it, Robert started murmuring a line from a long-ago song: “I get the feeling that I don’t belong here.” Suddenly, everything about this situation seemed silly and pointless, a feeling that instantly threatened to swamp everything in Robert’s life and surge into a thunderhead of self-loathing. But just then, in an act of charity as unwitting as it was uncharacteristic, Tristan Shane created a diversion to deliver Robert Fairchild from himself: he accepted an open door’s invitation and sashayed into Robert’s studio. With an involuntary yelp, Robert charged after him.

He entered just in time to witness his worst-case scenario play out, in real time, beyond his reach. Tristan Shane stood over the drawing table, holding Robert’s first and best new sketch in almost the same way Robert had -- arms outstretched, turning it this way and that, pulling it in, pushing it out. If he knew Robert was watching, he didn’t show it. Robert reeled in a wordless whiteout swirl, his heart beating in his ears. He took what he endeavored to make a restorative breath and then cleared his throat to announce his presence. Tristan Shane spun around and favored Robert with his first genuine smile.

“This is it,” the boy-king yipped as he held the sketch out for Robert to see. “This is perfect.”

Tristan Shane’s expression -- crinkled eyes, expectant grin, affirming nod -- made clear he was already basking in the grateful, relieved burbles Robert was now to commence heaping upon him. But this isn’t what happened. Robert was too busy speaking to follow Tristan Shane’s unspoken prompt, and what Robert unleashed was neither gratitude nor relief.

“What!/? No! Stop! That’s not... That’s not for you! Put that down!” As he said this, Robert raised his fist and shook it at Tristan Shane who responded by once more glaring at him. Robert looked up at his fist and holstered it in a hip pocket as he forced himself to pause. And breathe.

“Please put that down. That work, this room, are private. That isn’t... for you. That’s not...” He brought out his now limp hand and flopped it back and forth between the two of them. “...part of this. I’ll create a perfect signature for you. I promise. You’ll love it.”

Robert had turned sideways and was now gesturing with his arms like a traffic cop, directing Tristan Shane to move along, out of the room. But instead, his superstar client just stood there. The glare continued. His face clouded over, the brightness in his eyes darkened, and his head initiated a new series of nods, sharper and not at all affirming. Up came a silencing hand as he

continued to clutch the drawing with the other.

“The fuck is your problem? I’m telling you. This is it.” Now he was pointing at the sketch. “What did I say? Cool, strong, sexy.” Now he was holding the sketch with both hands again as he gazed at it. “Just make my signature look like this, like it’s made out of barbed wire veins and arteries and shit. This looks alive, like it’s got a pulse. It’s sexy, it’s scary, it’s... *what I want*.” He trailed off as he stared at Robert’s drawing. The affirming nods returned. Now he did put the paper down on the table, still nodding at it. “Yeah. This is it. This is my sign.” He snaked a thumb and forefinger into his back pocket and fished out his cell phone. A few rapid taps on its screen as he held it over the drawing. He was done before Robert registered what was happening: he was taking pictures of the drawing. Phone tucked back in his pocket, he walked over and clapped Robert on the back of a shoulder.

“Cool. Get on it. I want to bust this out at the Brit Awards next month.”

And then the boy-king was on the move again, zipping back out into the main room and the devil only knew where next. Robert stood in a fuse-blown stupor. What had just happened? He looked through the doorway and into the vacant space beyond. He thought for a moment of chasing after Tristan Shane to -- but here the impulse went blurry and instead he turned around and stepped over to look down at his drawing, the drawing that just a little while ago had thrilled him. To hold it and lose himself in replaying its consummation, this shape into that shape, slowly slowly slowly, then a rush of strokes and slashes -- that feeling, so right, so rare.

And now -- nothing. No. Worse than nothing.

Robert stared down at this drawing stripped bare. Seeing it snatched up and ravished by that snot-nosed, greasy-fingered brat. Taking pictures of it. Claiming it as his. It wasn’t his. It wasn’t. It...

And just like that, Robert felt everything inside him turn cold and hard. He hated the drawing now, and the way looking at it made him feel. It wasn’t his drawing anymore. And if it wasn’t his, then -- a lurid smile stretched across Robert’s face as he finished his thought. He reached down to take up the drawing, crumple it into a tight little ball, or rip it into tiny pieces, or set it aflame and watch it curl into ash. Or -- and here he added a chuckle to his smile -- all three. But before he could start, he felt his phone buzz in his back pocket. He grimaced and pulled it out to see who was calling and whether he would answer. “Gillian” appeared on the screen. He groaned and clicked her call away. Now he did scramble after his free-range interloper.

He was out on the patio, standing at the edge of the pool, looking down on Sunset. Striding double-time, Robert raced out, only to pull up just short of Tristan Shane. He stood precisely behind his new client, noting how the pop boy’s slight silhouette was eclipsed entirely by his man-in-full frame, an observation that prompted Robert’s first and only unforced smile. And as that smile lingered, Robert spun into his escape:

The sunlight glittered on the water. A honeyed breeze wafted down from the hilltop. The muffled drone of downhill traffic was the only sound as Robert picked up the matte-glazed decorative

urn, heavy but not too, and with both hands raised it high, stepped forward, and brought it down onto that famous, fabulous hair. He heard the crash; he felt the crunch. Robert was left holding two large pieces of the vessel while a shower of fragments rained down on the stone deck. Tristan Shane, meanwhile, pitched forward and crumpled into the pool, face down, motionless, a liquid cloud of crimson billowing slowly from his head. As Robert stared down, it reminded him of a teabag steeping in a steaming cup. He nodded at the sodden teen idol whose feet had now sunk so that his toes grazed the bottom of the pool, as if he were striking another pose. “You’re right, Tristan. A cup of tea really would hit the spot.” Now it was Robert’s turn to laugh at his own joke. As an *in memoriam* gesture, he swiped the back of a hand across his nostrils.

Robert blinked as he imagined trying to inventory all those ceramic shards scattered everywhere. Then there was the blood in the pool, not to mention the body, the surrounding hills with all those houses, all those eyes. And what about the designer hovercraft docked out front, full of “my boys”? Robert sighed and let go his reverie, watched it float up and away like a child’s lost balloon, and then stepped beside his guest. He took a beat to swallow back his exasperation before speaking, and thus found himself once more being spoken past.

“I can see my billboard from here. Lucky you. My house is so high up, all I see is haze. I’m thinking about getting a place on the ocean but, you know, the fuck do I care? I’m hardly ever here. There. Wherever.”

“Yes. Lucky me.”

Robert turned back toward the house, hoping to lead his new client by example.

“I know your time is limited.”

He took a few trial steps before turning to see if he was being followed. He wasn’t.

“Tristan?”

A last, lingering look at his billboard and Tristan Shane spun on a heel and motored past Robert, back into the house. Robert watched him disappear. His impulse was to follow, but he didn’t. Why was that, he wondered? But then he heard the front door’s distant slam. Now his impulse was to race in, make sure his home-invader was truly gone and that his door was securely locked. But once more he didn’t. Robert Fairchild simply stood and stared, first down at his feet and then back at his house and then down at his feet again. He felt his phone buzz again. He didn’t look; he knew who it was.

He tapped his acceptance while bringing the phone up to his ear.

“Hello Gillian.”

“I was calling to see if there were any survivors.”

“Har har. And fuck you, by the way. That really was some sort of hate crime you engineered,

sending Prince Charming over here without a word of warning.”

“I knew if I told you, you’d never let it happen. It was for your own good.”

“God protect me from those trying to help me.”

“You know I’m right. In fact, I’m a genius. I just got off the phone with his manager. He’s over-the-moon excited about the signature you’re designing. This is huge. This guy represents so many.... This is huge. We are celebrating tonight!”

Gillian went on like that for a bit longer and Robert didn’t try to stop her. He didn’t interrupt, didn’t jump in with any objections. He even nodded his head as if in agreement, but he wasn’t really listening. Her eager words were just a pitter-patter of sounds streaming by. She would be there soon. He was to get ready. She was taking him some place special. It was a surprise. She was very happy and excited. He should be, too.

There was a click and she was gone. Robert remained in his spot, alone, beside the pool, under a darkening sky. He needed to shower and get dressed, but he had a little time. He turned his gaze up to see if he could see any stars yet, through the haze. He tried to decide when he had decided, and decided that he didn’t know. No. Scratch that. That it didn’t matter. He slowly brought his gaze down and settled on Tristan Shane’s billboard and tried with all his might to feel lucky.



About the Author

Thomas Maurstad

Thomas Maurstad was the pop culture critic of the Dallas Morning News for over 20 years. Since his release back into the wild in 2011, he is endeavoring to create ambitious, compelling fiction.

About the Work

Thomas Maurstad

"As eager as I am to start referring to present realities in the past tense, I won't since, like a massive tropical depression that sits and swirls over us, refusing to budge, they are still very much in the here and now. We are living through an age of anxiety and overload, and as both an artist and a citizen, my existential challenge is to stay connected and to disconnect. When does connection become obsession? When does disconnection become denial? I want my writing to be of my time; I don't want it to be about my time. I suspect I will be trying (and mostly failing) to strike that elusive balance long after here and now is done and gone."



“Corridor in the Asylum” Vincent Van Gogh, Oil color and essence over black chalk on pink laid (“Ingres”) paper, 25 5/8 x 19 5/16in., 1889. Open source from The Met.



I watch the eagle  
    slam into the lake  
Stunned, and then scrambling  
    across the slippery ice  
She struggles and climbs  
    bleeding into the air  
She steadies, circles, perches, and an hour later  
    slams down hard again  
Testing in front of me  
    I make my way out  
To a see a catfish frozen  
    into the ice  
I spend a long time there  
    still, with the fish  
Back on shore I go to the shed and  
    take the small pick  
On the ice again  
    I chop at the surface  
It cracks a little but  
    I mar the hard ice  
I don't stop until the dead catfish  
    cannot be seen  
Freeing the eagle  
    from it's confusion  
Between what is alive and  
    what is gone  
I return to the house  
    and sit by the window  
Watching the lake for  
    a few more hours  
My wife asks  
    am I OK?  
I say yes, and then  
    I say no  
She understands because last night  
    my father died

About the Author

*Bob Gossom*

The Los Angeles writer Bob Gossom is known for his distinctive poetry and love of music, movies, books, hiking, body surfing, and tap dancing. While not widely published, his new works are avidly anticipated by a small band of fanatic and loyal followers. His stage production "Versified" premiered in January 2020 at the Golden Performing Arts Center in Los Angeles, and featured this poem.

About the Work

"My Dad died on December 24th. Driving to my mother the next morning, a story my brother told me 15 years earlier about an eagle on his lake kept coming into my mind. It took me a while to figure out why, but later that day I wrote the first draft of this poem. The line structure models the conflicting thoughts about my Dad, who died almost instantly at 89 after a wonderful life: Contemplative on the left; angry, violent language loaded on the right."