

Superpresent



Spring 2026



SUPERPRESENT

Superpresent

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Isa Graciano



Back Cover
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Ann-Marie Brown



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Rapeseed Field
Aliaksandra Markava

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Editors' Note

Let's begin. The theme of this issue is BEGINNINGS and we found lots of them in the submission bag. The cover, "The Origin of the World" by Isa Graciano, brings us there in a hurry. The sculpture appears to model a vulva but is in the shape of Africa, whose vaginal opening is the approximate location of the vast paleo-wetland that produced humanity. The highly worked baby heads by Ann-Marie Brown carry us a bit further along our way. Not every piece is as straightforward as newborn babies. Sometimes there is a new beginning found in the oddest of circumstances. See, for example, "A Plumber is a Useful Thing," by Faith-Ann Bell, where new possibilities are weighed and measured under the sink. Or the somewhat silly poems of Duncan Forbes, who lightly explains several billion years in a few rhyming couplets. But Forbes also gets very heavy when he considers other ways of beginning, as in the agonizing "Beginner's Luck."

A beginning doesn't necessarily imply that there was nothing before. Like in American bankruptcies, a fresh start can be a wondrous thing. Using Tarot, artist Tasnim Ismail gives those who choose to believe the tools to find stylish and exotic new beginnings. Aleksandra Vujisic's poem, "Revolution and Bows," reads like a devout prayer for a new beginning, the kind that is muttered in foxholes. And of course, sometimes there is the remorse of letting go of the old and the dread of confronting the new. See our video and sound section for details.

The theme for the next issue of *Superpresent* is MAPPING. We are hopeful that contributors will, as they usually do, challenge us and use their visions and voices to map, survey, calculate, or measure all that needs to be found or returned to. And, as always, *Superpresent* remains free to submit to and free to read online. We heartily thank those who subscribe to the physical magazine and if that's not you, well, map, chart, or navigate your way to superpresent.com and sign up!

-The Editors



Superpresent



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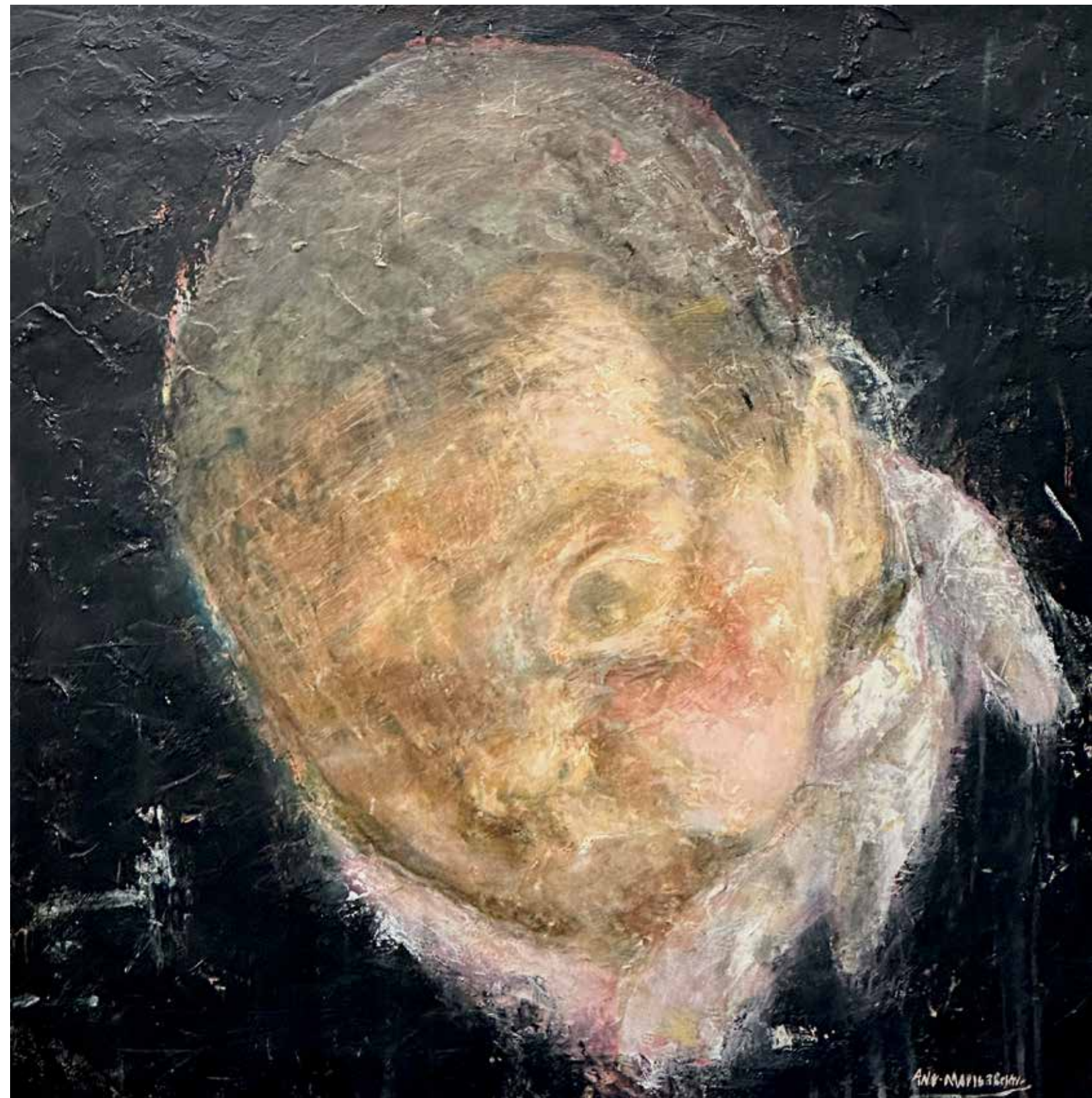


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Between Worlds 2
Between Worlds 3
Ann-Marie Brown



The Difference

Emma's life was divided into two parts: Emma Before and Emma After.

Emma Before liked to smoke with the boys, liked to drink at bars, liked to dance on tables.

Emma Before told dirty jokes.

In her heart, she felt the same now. Emma on the inside didn't change, just Emma on the outside. She knew approximately when the moment came, when the perception shifted. It was sometime between when she told Matt she was pregnant and when she showed her mother the ultrasound photo. Somewhere among OB visits and diaper purchases and painting the nursery an ugly-ass shade of green, Emma Before started to fade into a memory, and Emma After became present.

Emma Before liked to travel.

Emma After had to be responsible.

Emma before enjoyed dirty sex.

Emma After needed to be more discreet.

Emma Before loved pecan pie with extra whipped cream.

Emma After had to watch her diet.

The pressure, the expectations, wrapped around her, choked her. When the baby came out, Emma held her child and stared. A moment of satisfaction washed over her – she had done this! – followed by the realization that she couldn't go back, only forward, and she didn't get to choose.

"He's so pretty," her mother said, staring at the baby. "He looks like his daddy."

Because Matt got the credit for giving her a big, strong boy. Matt was the one who had to miss work to take her to the doctor's appointments. Matt attended birthing classes with her because he was a good father, a good man. Matt's life didn't have to change, though, not once the baby came.

Emma's did.

Emma Before had to die.

She didn't want this, didn't want to disappear. Emma didn't want to lose the things that made her wild and carefree and fun. She didn't want to give up the late-night shows, the cheesy hamburgers, the occasional "fuck" dropped at just the right point in a sentence.

But a mother doesn't get to decide.

Before the baby came, she was beautiful, carefree, messy. Before she was a mother, people laughed when she said she liked to suck dick, liked the feeling of falling asleep in a lover's arms.

After, she wasn't supposed to talk about where babies came from in the first place.

Before, she was a beautiful woman.

After, she was someone's mother.

Months After, Emma wrapped her arms around herself. Smoke wafted from Matt's mouth. She wanted a taste, wanted to remember, wanted to feel something again. She reached for his Newport, but he shook his head.

"What about the baby?" Matt asked. He stared at her like she ought to know better.

"The baby is at home," she said, her voice low. They had a babysitter and everything. Just for tonight. Just for this moment.

"Still. You're a mom now, you know."

"Right."

She dropped her hand, looked away, stayed where she was until he finished his cigarette because Matt Before and Matt After were the same person. It was only Emma who changed, Emma who had become nothing more than an echo.

-L.C. Mortimer



The Beginning of Voice
Sonali Narang



Feathers of Fragments
Jaime Maisuria
Right
Doula
Kaia Otstak



Flowers for an Ostrich

“I know the world is bruised and bleeding, and although it is important not to ignore its pain, it is important to resist evil. Like any failure, chaos contains information that can lead to understanding—even to wisdom. Like art.”

— Toni Morrison

Maybe it all began that night when I first found my husband in the hell of addiction and I finally understood everything I had been ignoring for so long. Maybe when, after eleven years of marriage, I told him I wanted a divorce. Maybe when, that very same day, I told my friends that I was fine and that everything was perfectly alright. After that it became far too easy: smile after smile and perfection lined up in the days that followed.

Maybe it began much earlier—when I tried to justify my father’s alcoholism and started hating my mother for leaving him. Or for leaving me with him.

“When did you start self-harming?” Olga asked me, the psychologist I began visiting a few weeks after the divorce.

“I don’t know. What exactly counts as ‘self-harm?’” I asked, and Olga watched me closely, trying to decide whether I was serious or just trying to provoke her.

“Anything you do to cause injury to your body—scratches, burns, wounds, pulling out your hair...”

“Well, when you put it like that it sounds like a perfectly ordinary day,” I laughed loudly as Olga’s pupils widened.

“Humor is a kind of defense mechanism,” she reminded me for the hundredth time.

“I didn’t see you laughing,” I replied.

She sighed. She was surely tired of patients like me who came wanting to solve a problem and then, halfway through the first session, decided to play games with her. And somewhere deep inside I felt sorry for Olga—for choosing this profession and for having to spend a Friday afternoon explaining to a thirty-eight-year-old woman what self-harm is, how “humor” becomes a defense mechanism, and how to stop doing it—both the self-harm and the joking.

“And I’m not laughing,” she finally said. “I’m just explaining what you’re doing.”

I paused to think about her question. I had been hurting myself for as long as I could remember. I pulled out my hair. I ruined my porcelain complexion, and then I kept doing it during puberty when it was no longer porcelain. I wore long sleeves until it became unbearably hot, and then I kept wearing them even when it did.

“Always,” I said after a short pause. “I mean, for as long as I can remember,” I added, as if I were submitting yet another report at work.

“And did anyone ever suggest that you seek help when you were a child, a teenager...?”

“No,” I answered shortly.

It’s a difficult thing when a person becomes confused by changes in their own beliefs—when for most of their life they never question why they do things a certain way, and then

overnight they begin asking questions. At that point there are only two possible scenarios: one in which the ostrich keeps being an ostrich, and another in which it pulls its head out of the sand. This was the moment when I had to decide which kind of ostrich I was, but I remained silent.

“It seems we could finish for today,” Olga said, as if she wanted to spare herself further torment.

“It seems so to me as well,” I said.

“The receptionist went home early today, so you can pay everything together next time, if that’s alright?”

“Of course. See you,” I said and left the office.

I wasn’t sure whether there would be a next time, but I would certainly ask them to send me the bill.

•

The next day I woke up in a strange tension. I had dreamed heavy, foggy dreams that I couldn’t remember clearly. There were flowers in them, the kind I had at my wedding. There were bottles of empty drinks. My father was there, unconscious, and I was there too, a little girl spending hours trying on things my mother had forgotten in the wardrobe, afraid I might wake him. There were pain and blood and vague memories, and as always after such dreams—I felt that the chaos in my head would never stop.

I was late for work, and while hurriedly grabbing my toothbrush I noticed new scratches on my left hand that I couldn’t remember getting.

My phone rang.

The screen read: “Don’t answer.” It was my ex-husband, who believed he could still call me whenever he got himself into trouble.

I threw the phone. The glass of the screen shattered against the tiles, and with it my desire to keep playing games seemed to shatter too.

I spent hours sitting on the bathroom floor until I finally shivered and woke from my daze. I reached for the landline and called Olga’s office. I scheduled the next session.

Then I called a florist and ordered flowers for myself.

-Aleksandra Vujisić



Revolution and Bows

Break free, little girl,
don't let them tie bows on you too often,
never on your hands.
Never let them convince you it wasn't terrifying
if your memories are.
Don't let them steal your song
or your voice,
don't let them tie your hands in bows.

Break free, little girl,
let the dollhouse wait for you—
you prepare revolutions.
Don't let them tear your clouds apart,
don't let them blow into your eyelashes.
Let fathers protect you,
let mothers protect you.

Break free, little girl,
light a torch and carry the light.
Wherever you go, let everything grow,
let your nine lives flourish,
let wild poppies sprout from your feet,
and let vines climb from your eyes to the sky.

Break free, little girl,
let physics and poetry be close to you.
Don't let them convince you joy is for the superficial.
Joy has always saved us—
remember joy,
not ribbons and bows.
Break free, little girl,
let the fire of life blaze inside you.

-Aleksandra Vujisić



Allegro
Courtney Johnson

THE MAGICIAN



To the Birth Mother I Never Knew

~ after Margaret Atwood's line in "For Archeologists"

–
"drawn by a hand hard even to imagine"

What's another way to say drawn?
Sketched? Pictured? 'Taken up by
someone thirsty, lifted, a
comfort, a satisfaction in somebody's hand.

Why does it have to be so hard
to picture even
this brief connection – a thirst attached to
a rope just strong enough to imagine.

- Colette Tennant

The Magician - Proscenium of Manifestation
Tasnim Ismail

Posthumous

Julia dreamt of being a mime, a career choice her parents found odd but assumed she would grow away from. It was difficult for them to understand why she would want to build a life from silence, hardly different from taking up the position of a monk. Julia spent her days practicing, rising from bed in the morning with a tiptoe; articulating her meal preferences with gestures. She learned which combinations of finger and arm movements best represented linguine, broccoli, and pizza bagels; which movements translated to her family the need for a nap or the desire for a walk.

The months passed and no one could convince Julia to talk. Her classmates found her silence curious and even endearing; a novel quirk that shattered the mundane rituals of the school day. Teachers begged her to participate, but there was nothing to be done. Eventually, her parents took her to family counseling with a therapist who specialized in child stress, hoping to end her self-imposed stillness. The three of them were given a battery of questionnaires designed to suss out the source of conflict, but the scoring for each tool indicated that nothing specific was amiss.

When she wasn't performing in her bedroom, Julia visited with the slugs and toads that populated the garden. The leopard slugs were her favorite. They slithered and cavorted through the hostas and rested beneath the bleeding hearts, leaving trails of slime behind like stardust. She spent hours outside counting their spots, watching as the toads mingled and hopped through the greenery. Once, she attempted to bring inside a mason jar with holes poked in the lid, tiny creatures clambering along the sides of the glass, but her mother made her return them to the yard.

Eventually Julia graduated to wearing suspenders and a striped shirt. She could tell she was losing favor with her extended family; her aunts and uncles had long ago stopped attempting to communicate with her at potlucks and reunions, and even her favorite cousins had moved on. Still, Julia persisted. She felt being a mime was her calling. No one else around her had been lucky enough to discover theirs.

Julia was disappointed when even her parents stopped trying. The washing machine no longer rumbled and gurgled with her black and white outfits, and the calendar's squares, once filled with counseling appointments written in red ink, lay bare save for scribbled-in grocery reminders and work happy hours. At first she assumed her parents had decided to follow her endeavor—dinners were painfully quiet, punctuated only by the sound of scraping forks—but soon realized her parents had begun to huddle in their room, conferencing in hushed whispers about what she presumed was her "condition." Dark circles began to appear under her mother's eyes, and she wouldn't invite Julia to help her file papers and make copies at the office on weekends. Her father mowed the lawn without asking Julia to refill the gas or point out the longest patches. She was lucky, Julia supposed, that her parents still fed her. At least there was that. But other than cursory passings of the gravy bowl or water pitcher, Julia did not exist.

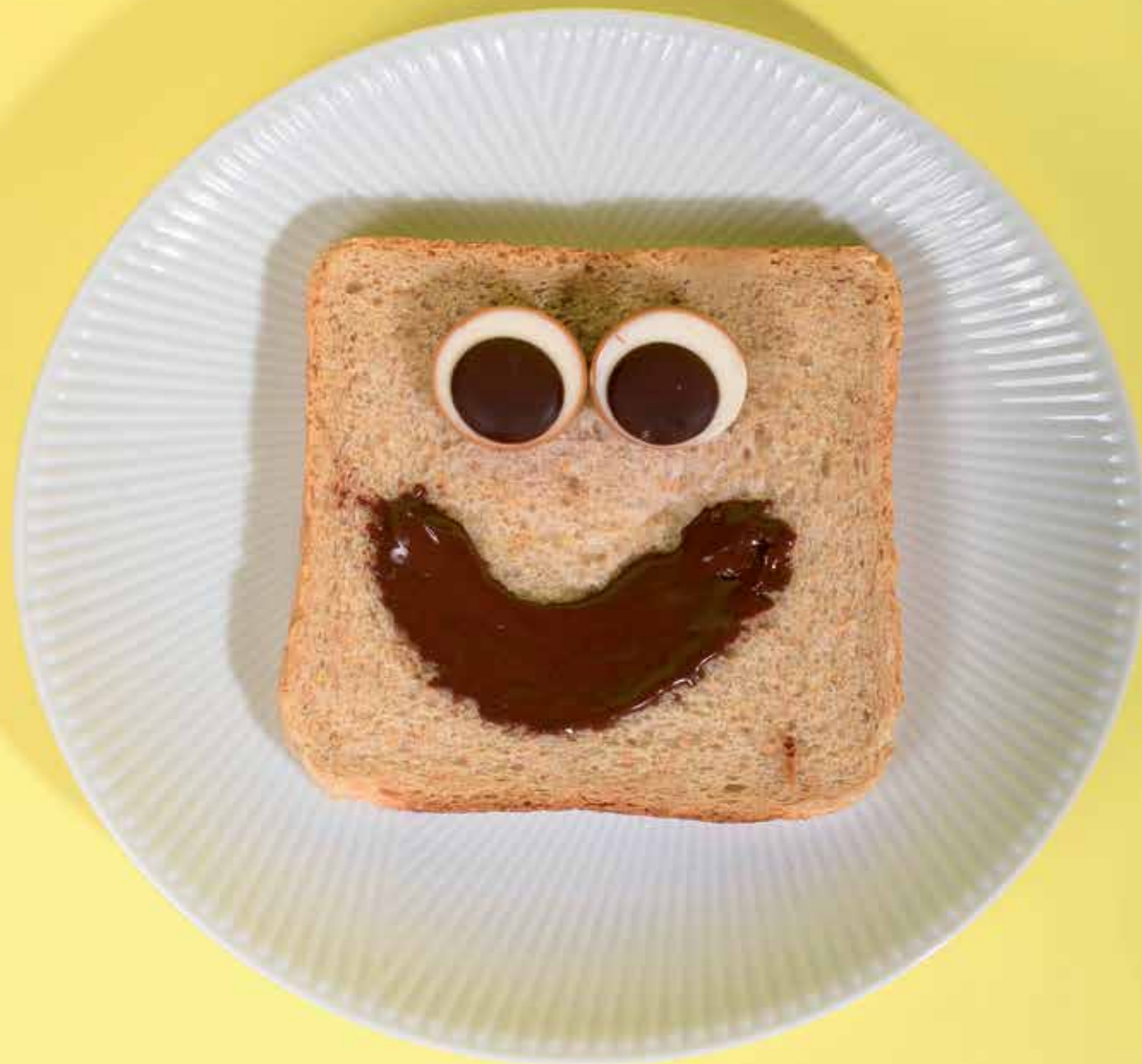
Soon, worms began to emerge from the dirt in the backyard like tiny flags, their bodies wet and wiggly in Julia's hands. She collected them in clusters inside shoeboxes lined with handfuls of soil and grass. They were the only things that would watch her performances. She wasn't surprised when her parents started banishing her to her room when guests came over, some of whom were informed Julia was on vacation. Others, who had never been to the house before and were new acquaintances, were told that Julia's parents had no offspring, and the room upstairs had been built for the anticipated product of a pregnancy that ended in miscarriage.

Late in the spring Julia began sleeping outside, a shoebox in each arm, still in her suspenders, dirt mounded beneath her head like a pillow. She hollowed a place in the ground with careful digging, a window cut into the earth. On the weekends she passed through the house like a ghost, carrying her creatures with her, leaving tracks of mud and pebbles behind. Her mother swept them up without even a reprimand, so unlike her typical chiding.

One night after a year had passed, Julia laid down in the garden for bed, surrounded by Spanish slugs and spiders, sky closing purple over the backyard like a giant tulip. The evening breeze was cool on her exposed skin; a ladybug chewed on her suspender strap. She was half asleep when something soft and warm hit her legs, and then her chest. Above, her mother stood expressionless, sifting dirt over her body with a shovel. Over and over and over again, she dug and lifted. Inside her self-made coffin Julia lay panicked. When she regained the capacity to move, her silent gestures weren't enough. Her mother had learned all the others, but these were new, even to Julia.

As the dirt closed over her head, she could see her father standing at the window, glass of brandy in hand, peering down at the spectacle with tacit acceptance. The worms crawled over Julia's body as worms do. And it was quiet in the garden, so very quiet. With a grim startle, Julia realized that for all intents and purposes, she had finally gotten her wish.

-Meggie Royer



*** Spinoza to Weil II**

Chard wilts. Garlic sweats. Olive oil
Opens its throat and sings.
At Rijnsburg, the stove ticks blue.
Ash smells sweet as paper.
I think of you kneeling on factory floors,
Chard wilts. Garlic sweats. Olive oil-
-blackened nails, wrists thin as reeds.
No ally, no enemy—only a face
Turned fully toward what arrives.
Bread proves itself. Yeast lifts.
Chard wilts. Garlic sweats. Olive oil
Fogs the room with wheat and heat.
Attention gathers like dew on thyme.
It tastes of metal and green.
The word affliction bruises the mouth.
Chard wilts. Garlic sweats. Olive oil.

- David Koehn

a good morning begins with a smile
Helge H. Paulsen



The Bartender

He watches one couple
walk through the door fighting,
behind them, a woman totters
on red stilettos, yanking
at her mini skirt.

She sits beside
a suited businessman at the bar,
there to unwind.

Others ache with stories nobody
wants to hear. It's hard
to imagine all the damage
that's been done to those
who cannot refrain from drinking.

Dim lights and widened ears,
live music blasting.
The bartender leans closer to listen—
secrets, demons, and dreams.

Each person yearns to empty their
ice-filled glass and have the bartender's ear
who, without professional training,
has learned how to listen
and not tell or judge.

Those bartenders.
Those companions.

-Diana Raab

it all began with a sin
Helge H. Paulsen

Another Chance

“15th Class Reunion of Heartland High” read the banner over the ballroom at the Grand Hotel in Cedarwood, Iowa. Jesse Pinkley slipped unobserved, he hoped, into the room. He didn’t see anyone he knew here yet. Or perhaps there was no one he recognized. It had been a long time. He kicked himself for even coming this far. High school had been the most painful four years of his life, except for---

“Jesse!!!! You old devil!” a gravelly voice rang out. That sound! The svelte, seductive form of Judy Duncan had been replaced with a matron’s girth, but he’d know the nasal voice anywhere. Judy had been his older sister Maura’s best friend until both girls liked Drake Montgomery, and then it was a pretty ugly cat fight and sometimes Jesse was in the middle. He squeezed his eyes shut to block out the memories. He wished Maura was here. But Maura was gone, her young body ravaged by a rare blood disorder. But maybe Judy didn’t know that. He’d have to go over the whole sordid story again, and...

“Juuuudy!?! The Juderator herself!!!” bellowed a balding man with a paunch --- *bad he gotten that old too?* He planted a wet kiss on Judy’s painted lips, and pulled her into the crowd, saving Jesse from the story he did not want to tell. He breathed a prayer of thanks and added, “Please let her be here.” He knew why he had come. There was no mistaking it.

Charlotte Banks. The most beautiful girl in the school. And his date for the Senior Prom. The girl he never saw again because he left the next week for boot camp and was in Iraq two months later. He didn’t dare ask a girl to wait for him when life was that uncertain. After Jesse’s wife of two years had left him, life had been a disaster. Thank God they had no children. He barely kept himself together. What with the PTSD and his bum knee, he was lucky to keep his job at the Post Office.

What could he offer Charlotte now? Most likely she was married, even though she’d signed up on the RSVP list under her maiden name. People often did that so they could be recognized by other alumni.

He sidled up to the punch bowl to get himself some liquid courage. It was heavily spiked as he suspected. Out of force of habit he scanned the exit doors. Three, all marked. People were streaming through the main double doors, and they all looked so *old*. It was gratifying, somehow.

The moment he saw the wheelchair the room started spinning. Someone must have done quite a number with the punch. He rubbed his eyes and looked again. Sure enough, it was Charlotte Banks wheeling herself confidently into the room through the double doors. And then it happened.

The room went dark. *Was it a power outage or a prank, or worse?* People screamed and started running for the main exit, which was clogged with people coming in. Then his training snapped in and Jesse began organizing a calm exit strategy. He called out orders to head towards the exits away from the double doors first to clear the area. Most everyone complied, happy to have someone who sounded authoritative.

The wheelchair whizzed past him. He wanted to talk to her, but he felt paralyzed. Would she recognize him? He couldn’t bring himself to speak to her. What would he say? *Hey, are you married? What’s with the wheelchair?* All stupid things. He concentrated on the task at hand. going back into the ballroom to see if anyone was still there. Only the hotel manager, hand on her earpiece, talking about a generator, and he thought he heard that police were dispatched.

He walked back outside. The sky was dark and threatening, and heat lightening pulsed in the distant sky. People were milling about, drinks in hand, talking about the coming storm.

“Good work,” a familiar voice said behind him. He turned to look, a stab of adrenaline shooting through his body. It was Charlotte.

“Charlotte,” he said, his voice cracking. Their eyes locked. She said nothing. She didn’t have to.

“I’m sorry,” he said finally.

“About this?” she asked, indicating the wheelchair, “or about leaving me after the prom?”

“Both,” he said, stepping into a landmine of possibility, “What happened?”

“IED, Syria.”

“You---?”

“I left a month after you. Had some crazy idea I could find you. You never wrote.”

“I didn’t know if I’d come back...” It seemed so lame now, so cowardly.

“Did you—are you---?”

“Married?” she finished for him, “No.”

It was a beautiful word, that ‘no’. Full of hope.

Maybe she wouldn’t have him. But at least he had another chance to find out.

- Amy Shore



Gathered in Bloom
Jaime Maisuria
Left
Caoimhe
Christina Kolaiti

Vegetarian

On Saturday morning, Wes threw a blue tarp in the bed of his pickup truck. The sky was overcast. No rain was predicted on the radio, but he wanted to be ready. From the warehouse, he had brought some empty cardboard boxes and packing tape. A paper cup of coffee was in his hand. It would feel wrong to drive with both hands on the wheel and no hot liquid to balance.

Wes drove to the address Laurel had given him, the Sylvan Arms apartments near the college. A young couple sat in the kitchen over a late breakfast.

“Hello,” he said. “I’m Wes. Buck and Nancy?”

Buck’s mouth was full. He didn’t look up.

“Laurel is in her room, packing,” Nancy said. “Molly is out.”

Wes found the room, which looked like a tornado had passed through. Clothes littered the bed and draped a bicycle. Cardboard boxes and piles of stuff blocked the floor. In the middle of the room stood Laurel, frazzled and flailing her arms.

“I don’t know where to start!” She was on the verge of tears.

“Relax,” Wes said. He gave her a squeeze. “This will be a piece of cake. Fold your clothes and put them in this box. I’ll pack the pillows, bedding, lamp, and so forth.”

“Do I have enough boxes?”

“I brought some clean ones from the stockroom. And a tape gun.”

“You brought a tape gun? Can I use it?”

“You bet,” he said. “Now get to work.”

Once she had a task to focus on, Laurel felt better. Never one to chat, she exchanged an occasional word with Wes. He mentioned the uncertain weather.

“It’s always like that on moving day,” she said. “Anyway, what’s a little rain when you’re starting a new life together?”

“I won’t argue with that.”

In the course of an hour, they had everything packed and taped. Laurel bent at the waist and reached for a box.

“Whoa, Nellie,” Wes said. “Use the muscles in your legs and butt, not your back.” He showed her. “Now you do it.”

She copied him.

“We’ll put the heavy boxes in first, fill the bottom of the truck bed. Then a layer of light things, then lay the bicycle on top. Okay?”

“Okay.” Laurel pushed the hair back from her forehead. The exercise had calmed her down. “Wes, I . . .”

“We’re not done yet, sweetheart. You can thank me later.”

Nancy and Buck made themselves scarce as they carried boxes out to the pickup truck and loaded the bed. At the end Laurel wheeled the bicycle out and looked at Wes.

“What now?” she asked.

“Stand on the other side,” he said. “Lift the bicycle horizontal, and lay it flat on top.”

“What’s going to keep it from sliding off?” Laurel asked.

“Bungee cords. Grab the one near you, hook it in the hole, and stretch it over to me.”

“Oh, this is fun, like a giant rubber band. Boing, boing!” Laurel acted like a cartoon character.

They secured the load. Wes waited in the cab, while Laurel went back in the apartment to check one last time and say goodbye to Nancy. She emerged carrying a spikey potted plant and climbed in the passenger seat.

“What is that?” Wes asked.

“Aloe vera. It’s a parting gift from Nancy. The juice has healing properties.” She set the pot in her lap and reached over her shoulder for the seat belt.

“Do you drink it?”

“No, you break off a leaf and apply it to your skin for a cut, a scrape, or a burn.”

“Sounds like something to keep on hand in the kitchen.”

“I never thought about that.”

“You don’t spend much time at the stove?”

“No. Wherever I lived, someone else took care of food. My mother, the college dining hall, Nancy. I’m more of a consumer.”

“Are you ready to roll?”

“Ready.”

At the house, Wes parked in a restricted space because it was close. They unloaded, and by the time they were done, he was winded.

“Let’s sit for a minute,” he said. “I need to catch my breath.”

“I left my aloe vera in the passenger seat.” Laurel went out to fetch it. She came back with the pot in her hands, gazed at the mess, and put it on the kitchen table.

“What’s in these boxes, anyway?” Wes asked.

“Books and notes from college, every course I took, every term paper I wrote. I should sort through them. But I’m not ready to face that chore.”

“The boxes won’t wander off. You must be a good reader.”

“The funny thing is I never read books unless I have to. And I work in a library.”

“What about magazines and newspapers?”

“I browse them at the library.”

“When you should be working?”

“On my breaks. I’m not that bad.”

“I never said you were.”

“I read the weekly newspaper cover to cover, the *Vindicator*. I like the local news, especially the social notes. It reminds me of home, the small-town feeling. Everything is important, and everyone matters, including their dogs.”

“Isn’t that the truth. What about online?”

“I’m not one of those people who constantly check their email and phone messages and text their friends. I log in at the library and that’s enough. You’re not the wired type, either.”

“I’m an older generation, for one thing.”

“Remote conversations don’t appeal to me. If you can’t talk to someone face to face, what’s the point?”

“Amen, sister. Oh, I forgot, you’re not a Christian.”

“Yes, I am! Just not the kind who would say that.”

“Let’s say you’re an ethnic Christian. Or a yogin, if that’s a word.”

“That reminds me. Crystal convinced me to go vegetarian. Did you know that vegetarians live six years longer on average? And they’re healthier.”

“You eat what you want, Laurel. You’ll never hear a word out of me one way or the other.”

“When we eat together, you do the cooking. Why don’t you give it a try? It’s easy to substitute other proteins for meat. And dairy products are okay.”

“I’m careful about fat and salt. Olive oil instead of lard. Sauté instead of deep fry.”

“You’re a good cook.”

“One of my many talents.”

“How about one week? If you can’t stand it, then at least you tried. I’ll help with shopping. There’s a health food store near my bus stop.”

“One week. I’ll do it for you.”

“Goody!” She wrapped her arms around him and gave him a big kiss.

“Vegetarian is all right.”

“Come to the next potluck supper for Voice of the Turtle. They told me to invite you.”

“I wouldn’t fit in, darling. Like an onion in a bed of roses.”

“How do you know? You haven’t even met them. You could bring your eggplant dish. What’s it called?”

“Ratatouille. It has other things in it.”

“Such as?”

“Zucchini, tomato, garlic. It’s a veggie stew.”

“You’ll sweep them off their feet.”

This made Wes laugh, and Laurel pressed her advantage.

“Better yet, let’s invite them here. I mean, can we? I never hosted a potluck at the apartment, so I owe them.”

“Or maybe you want to show off your new boyfriend.”

“Maybe. Anyway, they made a request. It was Molly’s idea, and the others jumped in. Can you write a song for the group? Something we can sing at a rally.”

“A protest song? Like Woody Guthrie, but for animal rights?”

“I don’t know. Like your other songs. Serious . . .”

“. . . but not too serious.”

“An animal anthem,” she said.

“My first commissioned work.”

“We’ll invite the group here, and you can unveil the new song. Is that okay?”

“Whatever you say, darling. On one condition.”

“What condition?”

“You’re going to sing it with me.”

“But I can’t . . .”

“Oh, yes, you can! I heard you when you thought no one was listening. Sweet as a songbird.”

“I sang in school choruses, but I never took lessons. I can barely read music.”

“A paltry excuse. Come here. Sing Ah.”

She sang like a child, with no vibrato. Wes put his hands on her waist.

“Support the tone from your middle, down here. Breathe with your diaphragm.”

“Like yoga?”

“Could be. I only know about singing. Again.”

“Ahhhhh!”

“Very good. In the music business, you’re what they call a natural. I think we’re going to sound just fine.” With his hands already on her body, Wes started to get amorous.

“Don’t you have to move your truck?”

“Shoot, they’ll give me a ticket.” He grabbed his keys.

“See you later.”

The cottage had a tiny annex that might be a bedroom. Wes used it for music practice. Now it became storage for Laurel’s boxes. True to her word, she never opened a box or read a book. Wes got used to seeing the bicycle on the front porch. Laurel could be out, but the bicycle meant she would come back, like a chicken coming home to roost.

The aloe vera sat on the kitchen table like a cactus, or a gray-green visitor from another planet. Did it ever bloom? Did the flower catch flies or resemble an internal organ? Some day, Wes thought, the ugly plant would come in handy.

-Robert Boucheron

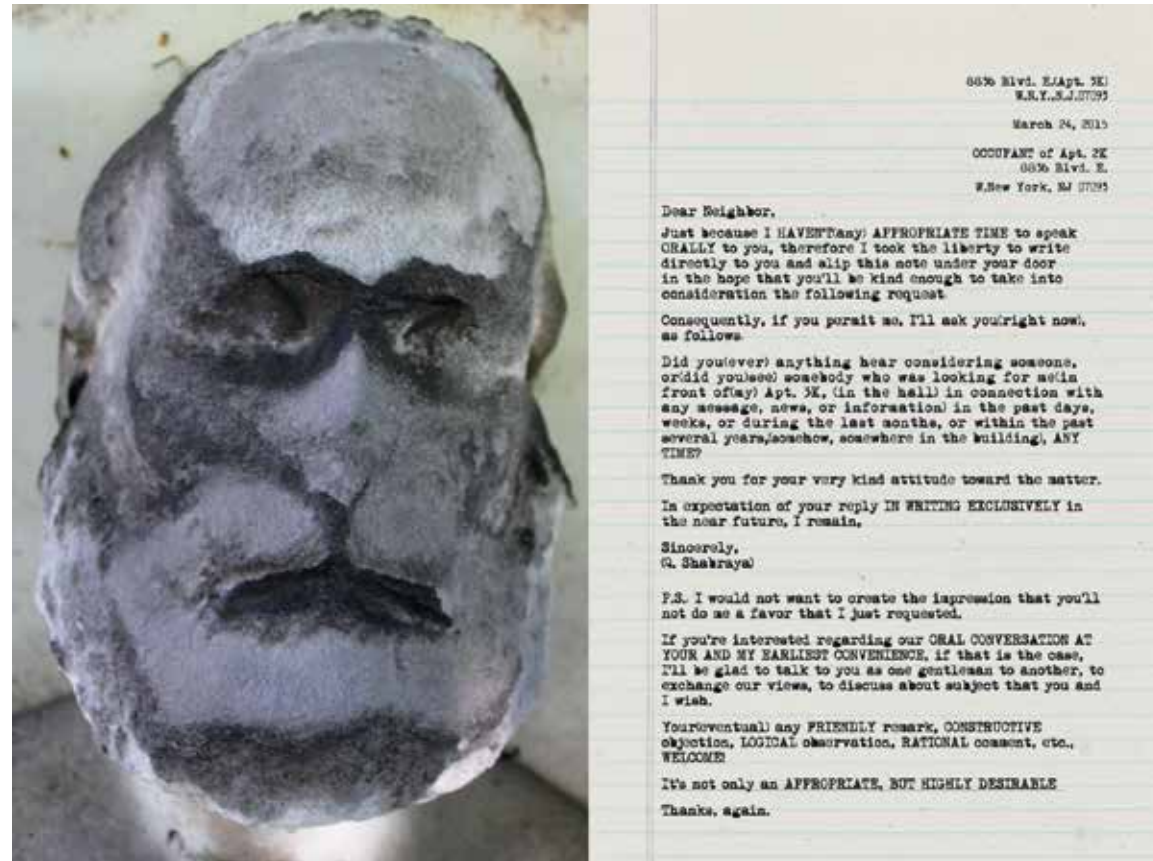


Still Life with Eggs
Jennifer Pratt-Walter

Bigfoot and Other Fallacies

The first time they ever met, he picked her up from a Taco Bell parking lot. They drove out of town, far into the secluded woods, and on the way, he spewed knowledge of the world wars, confessing without apology or embarrassment that he admired dictators and organized parties, even though she was Jewish and he knew it. At first, the only thing shared was desire: a yearning for contact, a pressing need to touch. To taste. To be fully exposed. There was a thrill in the strangeness, the newness. They couldn’t have known—not then—how their lives would change, how they would become intertwined. That day, they talked about everything, from Bigfoot theories to the irrefutable facts supporting the existence of extraterrestrial life, even their shared distaste of society’s pressures to pursue a dream life. He expected nothing of her; she wanted everything. It took years to realize these too were lies.

-Genevieve Sarnak



Dear Neighbor
Mark Bickley

Rush Hour In NYC

I feel engulfed-surrounded by a wall of faces.

It is 8:30 am, morning in NYC-at the height of the rush hour...

New York's workers start to spill out onto the city streets in front of me.

Their heads' are attached to motionless bodies like mine.

They are frozen in motion, stopped in transit,

And crystallized in millisecond time.

Like me, they wait for the traffic light to change.

There is no sound, no wasted movement...

All are immobile.

Time seems to stand still but then.... The minute hand on the clock at

The corner of 42nd St and 5th Avenue moves...

The light changes to green and everyone walks and returns to their frenzied dance.

This is the morning commute, the morning rush hour.....

Lives dictated by time and transit.

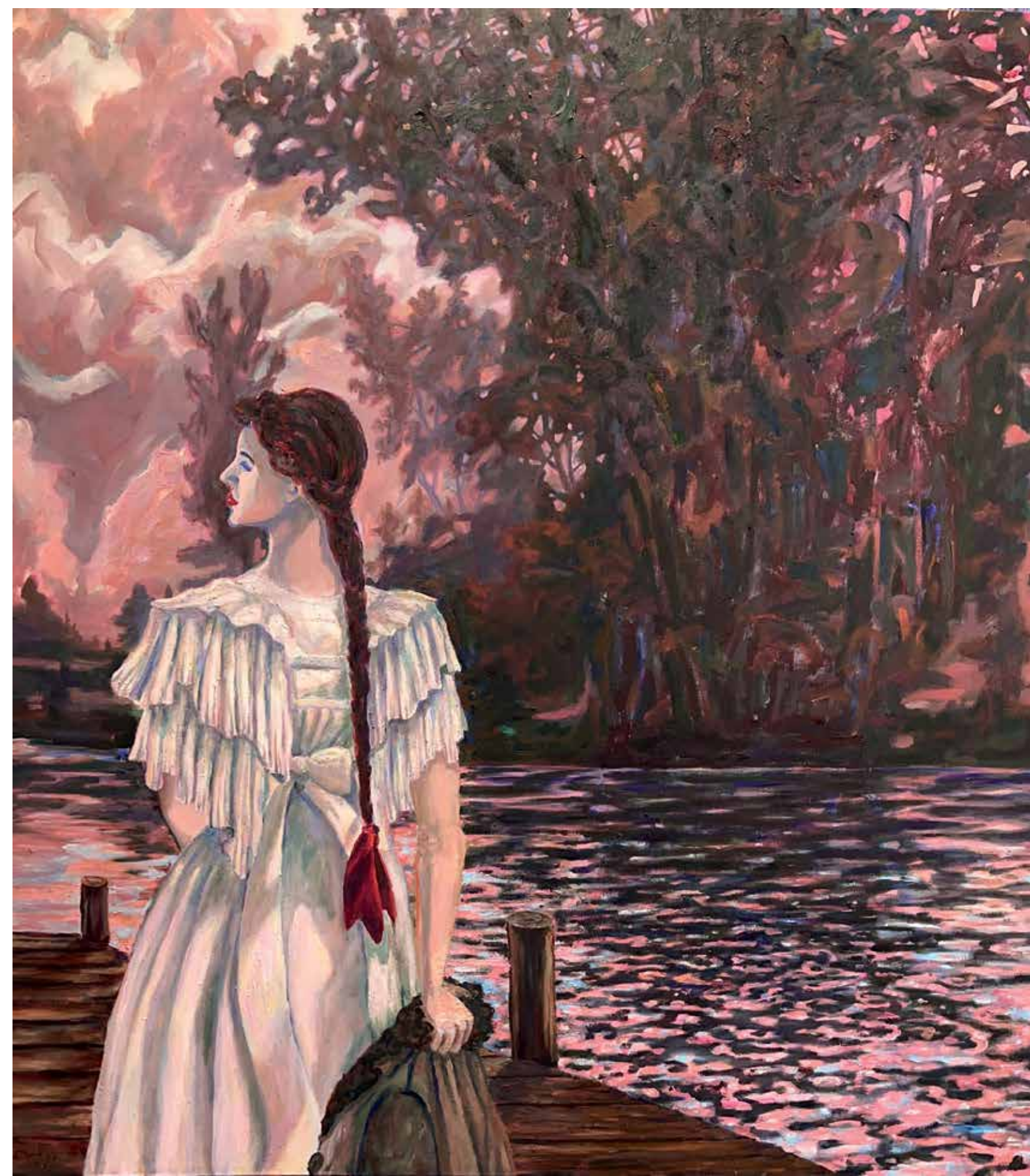
-Rosetta Dorsa

You Don't Know What You Got

The man sat on the bench next to Eric.
Really? Eric's thoughts were laced with sarcasm.
He'd been taking his lunch hour in the park across the street from his office building.
He had to work on his company issued laptop, but at least it was in a different location.
It's nice to escape that fluorescent illuminated cave, he thought.
For a couple of minutes.
"I can come join you," his wife, Jennifer, suggested when he told her his new lunch-time ritual.
"I'd like that, but..."
Jennifer glared at him. She was familiar with that tone as well as all his others.
"If I don't take a working lunch, it'll put me behind schedule."
"Of course." Jennifer had a way of making her sarcasm sound like understanding.
And vice versa.
But she was always complaining that he got home late every night. And he hated that all he got to see of the boys was their sleeping forms in their beds.
He needed a little time for himself. Days were all about making his bosses and co-workers happy. Nights were listening to his wife's daily struggles with her job and the kids (even though she had a nanny to help her out). Weekends were all about the boys (if he wasn't working Saturday). Before he knew it, it was Monday again.
Even with his laptop on his knees, it was nice to be alone for almost an hour a day.
So that's why he was irritated when the man sat next to him. Granted, there was room for two, but there were plenty of empty benches.
Why's this guy sitting here? Would it be rude to ask him to move?
At least he was quietly reading a book and not attempting to make conversation. Still, every turn of the page was like a thunder crack.
After a few moments, the guy's cell phone rang. Eric audibly sighed. *Here we go, the long personal conversation that should be made indoors.*
"Hi, honey-"
Great, it's his wife. They're going to fill each other in on every moment of their day so far.
Eric debated moving, but he was here first. The other guy should move if he planned to talk a long time.
"Is this a sick joke?"
The man's tone surprised Eric.
"OK, OK. I'll be right there."
The man fumbled to hang up his phone.
Good. Now he'll leave.
The man remained. And, much to Eric's surprise, began crying.
Ignore him.
The man cried louder. Eric felt a tightness in his own chest.
Don't get involved, Eric told himself. But he reluctantly asked the sobbing man: "Are you OK?"
The man could barely blurt the words through his tears. "My... my daughter... my daughter is... dead."
Shit. How do you respond to that?
"I'm... sorry..." was all Eric could say.
"She was... hit by a car... on her bike," the man continued, obviously needing to talk.
"My wife said he came out of nowhere..."
"How old?" Eric asked automatically.

"Seven."
"My oldest boy is seven," Eric realized. "I couldn't even..."
But he could. He imagined his son's body twisted and broken on the pavement. Victim of a reckless driver.
"Can I... do anything for you?" Eric hoped the man understood this was only a gesture; he really didn't want to do anything.
Or do I?
"Yes. Go home and hug your boys."
"They're with the nanny..." Eric said automatically.
"Don't pawn them off on somebody else! Spend every moment you can with her... Them!"
"Yes..." Eric hung his head in shame.
The man stood, towering over Eric. Eric turned away, unable to stare such a broken man in the face.
"Will you be...?" Eric began.
"No," he sobbed. "Now go be with your children."
Do you know how much work'll pile up if I take an afternoon off? Eric wanted to tell the man.
The image of his son's body on the pavement changed his mind.
"Yeah, good idea," Eric said as he rose from the bench.
As he left the park, he decided carving out time with his family was more important than any job.
The man watched Eric practically walk away. There was no doubt he was going to start spending more time with his wife and kids. A smile spread across his face. His tears already dried.
The man removed his cell phone from his pocket and dialed a number.
"OK, Jennifer, it's done," he spoke to Eric's wife. "Your husband'll appreciate you and your kids a little more from now on."
Jennifer thanked him profusely.
"Just doing my job."
The man hung up the phone and decided to call his husband and invite him to the park for lunch. It was too beautiful of a day to waste.

-Thomas J. Misuraca



Left
Rufus
Christina Kolaiti
Louisa Fletcher in the Land of Beginning Again
Tyler Alpern

VIDEO AND SOUND

Decades of Paradise: The Rotting of Apo Dilim

Anthem: Dionysus Experiment

Decaparaíso: Ang Kabulukan ni Apo Dilim is an experimental short that explores the visceral intersection of endings and beginnings. The film follows the final journey of the ailing patriarch, Apo Dilim, and his child, Anak. Set against a landscape of systemic decay, the narrative culminates as the father dies in Anak's arms. This pivotal moment forces a haunting choice: will Anak perpetuate his father's dark, inherited legacy, or will he break the cycle to embrace a liberated path? It is a raw, ritualistic dissection of the Filipino soul's descent into madness and its struggle for a new agency.



<https://cinemata.org/view?m=fw9CEXKj0>

Metamorphoses

Marina Milito

A video dance that delves into the visceral relationship between body, gestation, and nature. We follow the relationship between a female body gestating in natural landscapes where each element - water, earth, fire, and air - guides her body through a rite of passage. The visual and poetic narrative traverses cycles of birth, transformation, and rebirth, choreographing gestures that intuitively express the performer's feelings. On riverbanks, in mud, sand, and bathed by the sea, the body dances the journey from seed to discharge, from womb to combustion, from breath to void, and back to the womb, surrounded by calm waters.



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kHO9JxW3fj8&rco=1>

Nightscape #2

Valentin Sismann

At night, a group of hands draw a landscape with matches. Nightscapes is a series of works exploring the act of seeing, constructed around a certain use of darkness. The imaginary space that is the black screen transforms and mutates according to the various luminous figures that inhabit it. It is a game, a piece of music - about the nearly nothing to see, the not much to perceive.



<https://vimeo.com/1150842684?fl=pl&fe=vl>

Schön

Nemanja Popadić

Schön is a multi-channel video installation composed of twelve parallel projections— showing only the hands of an individual engaged in continuous, synchronized applause. The number twelve echoes both the structure of judgment (a jury of twelve) and spiritual symbolism (the twelve disciples), situating the act of applause in a liminal space between authority and faith. Layered with a dense soundscape—from mundane urban noises and social media notifications to ominous alarms of imminent airstrikes—the work interrogates how the ubiquitous gesture of clapping becomes a hollow ritual in an age dominated by spectacle. Drawing from Guy Debord's critique of modern society, the piece examines how the constant oversaturation of content through social media alienates and anesthetizes us, blurring the boundaries between urgency and triviality. In this perpetual stream, applause becomes indistinguishable from alarm, celebration from catastrophe. We are rendered passive—unable to discern or respond meaningfully—because everything begins to feel the same: one continuous, numbing spectacle.



<https://vimeo.com/1085071894>



Invasive Plant
Veronik Mol

An Office of One's Own

Finally a full-time professor,
I am given my own office,
not a cubicle or shared desk,
but an entire room, window
even, though it looks out
to the building's atrium.

Immediately, I decorate it
with everything my husband
would hate. My favorite
is a portrait of Gregor Samsa
waking up as a cockroach,
spindly legs and confused face.

I've gathered my snail collection
by my monitor—a Zuni fetish
gifted to me by a student, a gold
paperweight with a magnifying
glass shell, and a small painted
metal one with a head that bobs.

On the wall, literary insults hang—
Shakespeare was one shady mother-
fucker—and a motivational poster
that caused our department's
administrative assistant to ask,
Exactly why do you like it?

A lot of my colleagues prefer
to work from home, but I revel
in the silence, in my ownness.
No kids knocking on the door
or husband asking, *What?*
when I proofread out loud.

Just me in absolute solitude
hunched over my laptop
and fervently typing or
face in a book, pen in hand,
Mary Janes propped up
atop my very own desk.

-Genevieve Betts

A field guide to losing

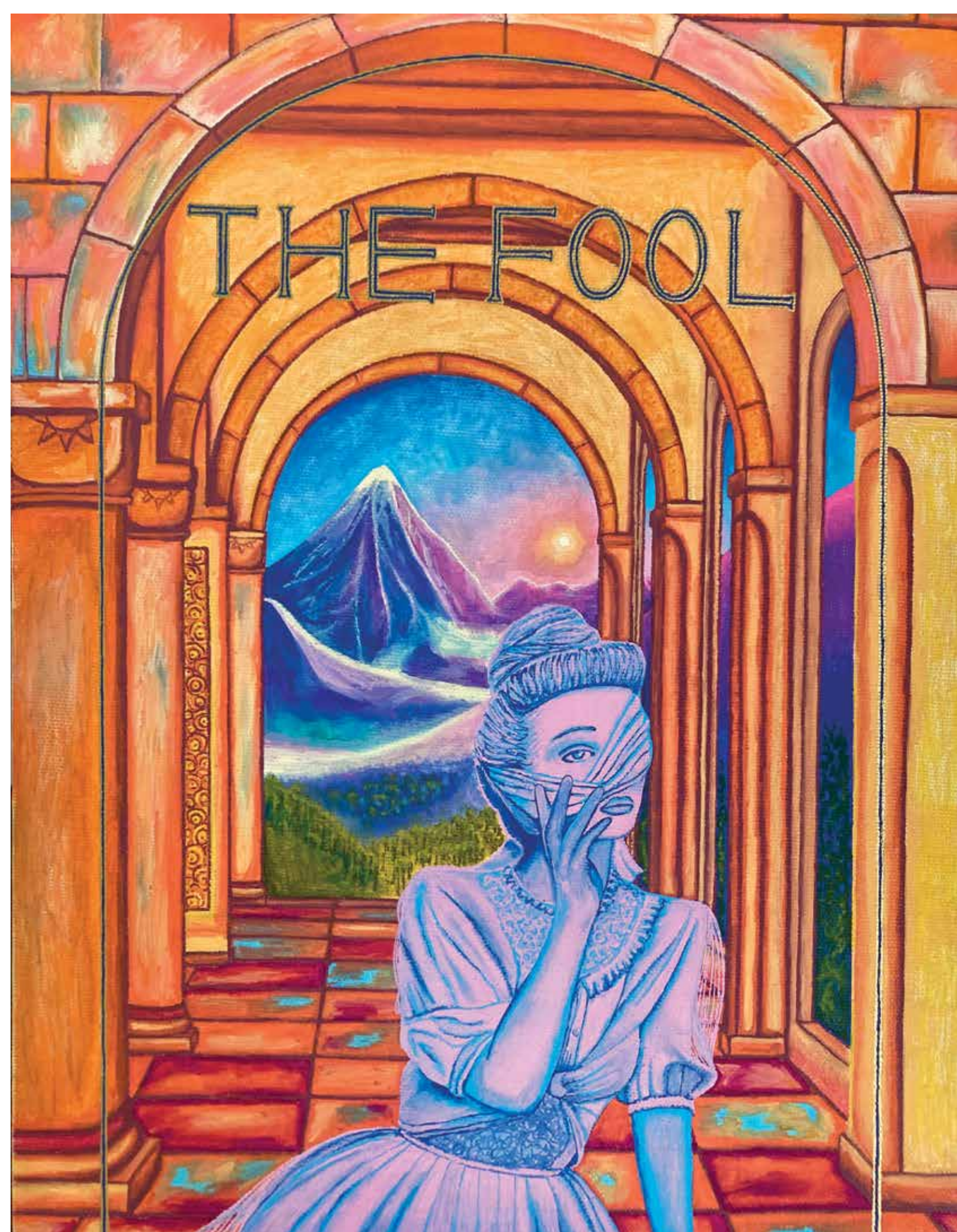
Breathe green to begin
Lungs of tumbling emeralds drawing in -
A pair of yawning olive knees
Grass embroidered fingernails
Before September rains the wildlings clean
A clumsy just-plucked lemon
- a slice of lime in the neck
Smudge at the edge of week old bruises
- a fading ombré map
What the turquoise swallows
The confidence of moss
How cocoons sashay to say
'You've not seen me yet'
While naivety, Hulk and envy share the rent

Jaded green drops by seeds, meets herself
in losing. Like a field-size beginners guide
to breathing

-Lisa Perkins



Ever-blooming youth
Ghada Ben Hassan
Right
The Fool - Foyer of Discovery
Tasnim Ismail

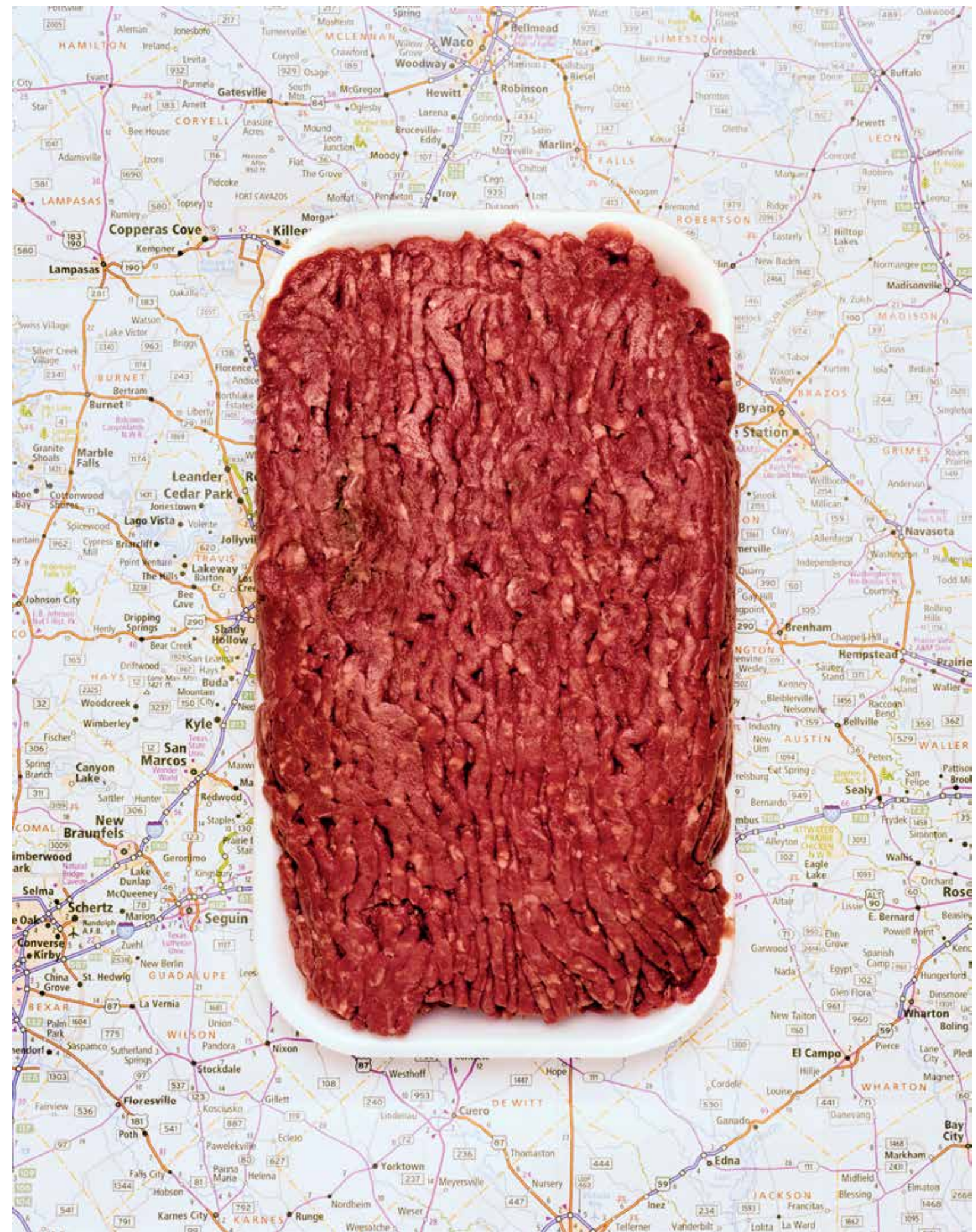


Tipple

In the wee hours, the fire alarm strobos and screeches. Sloshed, I combat-carry him out, though on the top step he slips from my grip. He tumbles down and cracks his skull on the cinderblock wall. I sift his tousled hair with shaky fingers, spotting a nick of blood buried in blond. Once the drill ends and our dormmates file in, I fib that he merely tripped. No one blinks, so we lug him to bed. Come morning he's mute. I lift his eyelid, but his pupil rolls off-center. His father appears, hoists his son into the back seat of his sedan, then guns it. In the post-op room where I visit him, he sits by the window in a wheelchair. His words slur like the night we guzzled magenta-colored cough syrup, wandered pines in the slanted snow, lying on our backs making angels. Yet now, he mutters his brain is swollen, that a chunk of skull was stolen. His raven-haired mother slips me a twenty on the sly, gratitude, perhaps, for my making the trip. I call him every so often as he relearns to walk and talk. Later on, he lands a gig as a lot attendant, mixing music on the side for the world wide web. Over time his audience grows. Ardent fans of his channel travel far for one-night stands. Truckers and mothers alike rap on his rambler at dusk, all to tryst with the country kid with wall-to-wall shelves of honky-tonk. It does not take long for his food pyramid of pill and drink to topple, his famed station to shutter. He calls me sometimes on my way to the office, begging for help to quit. I let it go to voicemail, listen to it later. I watch old footage of him now and again. His ghost strumming that guitar in the rickety backyard, a world wild with dandelions.

-David Daniel

the time I watched a grown man throw a bispy fit
Kristy Peet



That Explains A Lot

One day on the school noticeboard, I saw a printed advertisement for the *Daily Mirror* Children's Literary Competition. And so I entered in the 13 to 16 age-group. I can't remember whether I had written the poem already or whether it might have been composed for the competition. As required, I copied it out neatly in my best italic handwriting and asked Mr J.J. Evans, our kindly, bespectacled form-master from the previous year and the Head of Classics to authenticate it as 'all my own work', as the rules required. John-John as we called him smiled and asked,

'Is it indeed your own work, Forbes?'

'Yes, sir.'

'So can I put my signature to that effect without perjuring myself?'

'Yes, sir.'

'And when did you write it?'

'This term.'

He appended a familiar squiggle to my manuscript and I sent it off. The poem was called without irony 'His Bird' and it recreated an episode where I had seen or thought I had seen an exotic bird in the grounds of my previous school called Swanbourne House. That glimpse or vision became in the poem a guiding spirit for me. We had previously studied *Macbeth* and Chaucer (*The General Prologue*) among other works with Mr Evans. Looking back now, I can detect in the poem the combined influences of The Ancient Mariner, a little Coventry Patmore, a bit of Blake, *The Prophet* by Kahlil Gibran and many other things.

I don't remember how the news reached me but to my adolescent astonishment I was asked to ring someone in Fleet Street. Who? Somebody Drinkwater? Eric Linklater? In the boarding school at that time, there was only one central public phone for use by boys and conversations were audible to those waiting in the queue. The male journalist told me that I was joint winner of the Special Award and then I answered some questions. I was fifteen.

During the summer holidays, an article duly appeared in the tabloid *Daily Mirror* and I realised that I would soon be known at school as a poet when what really carried weight with many of my contemporaries was sporting rather than cultural prowess. The prize was a princely £50 which is said to be worth over £1,000 in today's values. The joint award-winner was called Carol Wiseman and both in her newspaper photograph and her poem ('Dream Lions') she seemed to be far more mature than I. As for my winning poem, I can hardly bear to look at it now and I can only imagine that the distinguished board of judges found its naivety fresh and appealing.

Indeed, I have not looked at the blue booklet which contains these youthful efforts for many years and it took me some time to find it on the shelves. Apparently, there were more than 20,000 entries to 'the fifth *Daily Mirror* Children's Literary Competition' in 1963. The work was sifted by a 'Preliminary Selection Panel' and then a 'distinguished Advisory Panel' chose the winners. I even recognized some of the names on that panel: Herbert Read, Richard Church, William Golding, Laurie Lee and Kathleen Raine.

In his brief introduction to the accompanying anthology called *Children as Writers*, Sir Herbert Read declared in his concluding sentence: 'We believe the successful entries show that in rare cases the child is capable of a quality of expression that is to be judged and accepted by the highest standards of literature.' Well, well. My effort surprises me now, not least in its length of 74 lines, and it became for me a hostage to fortune, especially when it

was reprinted in the school magazine.

In some ways such stellar and precocious success placed a demanding burden on me. After that, some people but especially my own inner self expected me to be able to write distinctively again. But the more I explored poems and 'travelled in the realms of gold', the more difficult I found it to produce anything satisfying or in my own voice and style, or at all. I found it hard to proceed. Influences came and went and yet the demanding struggle for ideas and expression continued. I moved away from Hopkins and Dylan Thomas towards Auden and Philip Larkin, with Betjeman and Yeats as other influential presences. Meanwhile, I was academically occupied in trying to translate and to 'read' or decipher the set classical texts from Greek and Latin, including Homer, Sophocles, Virgil, Horace and Catullus.

Later and in due course, I was interviewed to study Classics at Corpus Christi College, Oxford, and a senior tutor called Mr Brock asked me where I thought poems came from. There was a long pause while I cogitated and then said,

'Thinking.'

'Just thinking?'

'Yes,' I replied. (It now seems a most unsatisfactory answer, although verbal consciousness and cognition have played an extremely important part in writing until the advent of AI.)

Unfortunately, however, mere thinking did not produce poems for me and in my student years the composition of poems dwindled as against the rigorous study of the classical poets, until I switched with relief to English Literature.

I much admired prose fictions by William Golding such as *Lord of the Flies* and so I used the copyright Bodleian library to summon from the stack his first fugitive volume of *Poems* (1934) by W.G. Golding, then an undergraduate at Brasenose College. I had read an essay by William Golding in which he talked about the crosses he had to bear. In his case, one such cross was 'the inability to write poetry' of any worth or distinction. It was only after naval service in World War Two and years of schoolmastering in Salisbury that William Golding wrote *Lord of the Flies* (1954), the novel which was to make him world-famous.

Golding's life story is well told in John Carey's compelling biography, *William Golding: The Man who wrote Lord of the Flies*. His literary beginnings and very first publication of *Poems* betray no real signs of the writer he was to become. Golding later tried to distance himself from his juvenilia and disown the little blue booklet. He wrote tellingly about the experience in an essay called 'My First Book' in *The Author* (July 1981). As a literary rarity and curiosity, however, copies are currently highly priced at over \$3,000, figures which Golding dismissed as 'nothing but value by association.'

Similarly, as an undergraduate admirer of the novels of Graham Greene, I tracked down and read in the Bodleian Library his very earliest publication, a pamphlet of poems called unpromisingly *Babbling April* (1925). It was a comparable case of early infatuation with poetic effects detached from any of the realities which characterized the observant young novelist in what came to be known as Greenland. As is well-known, Graham Greene went on to produce distinctive fictions in every decade of the 20th Century from the late 1920s onwards.

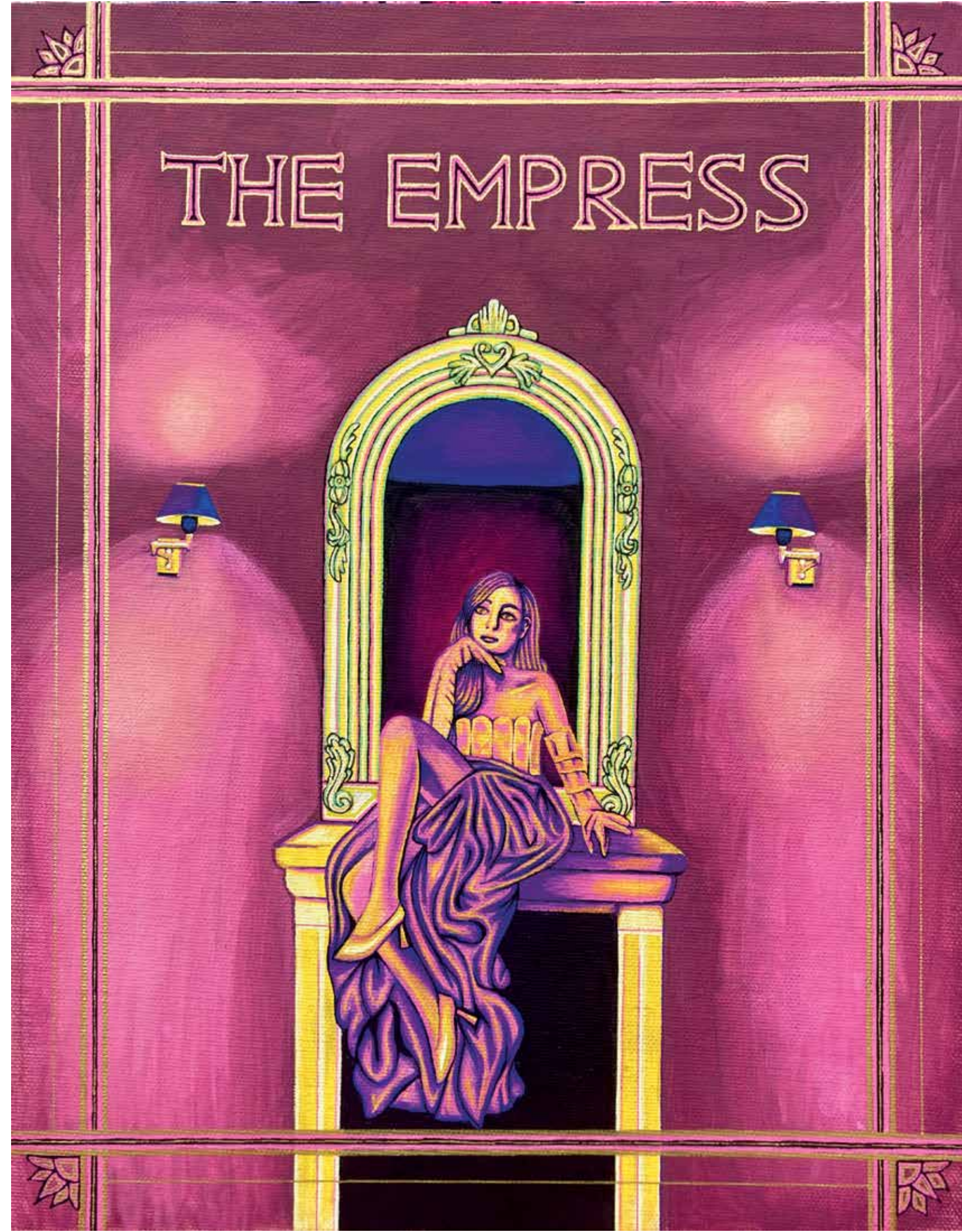
From such callow and misguided poetic beginnings, however, and from a great deal of persistence, a distinctive body of work can grow. The poet manqué can become the great

novelist. But I believe it is rare for the novelist manqué to turn into the great poet. Let me know if you can think of apt examples, other than perhaps Philip Larkin. As a minor poet approaching what I now imagine to be towards the end of my creative life, I would rather like to have become a writer of narrative fictions as well but it is not going to happen now. When a novelist friend learned that, at the age of fifteen, I had won a national poetry prize with an early poem, he simply said, "That explains a lot." And perhaps it helps to explain why I am still trying to write memorable poems over sixty years later.

-Duncan Forbes



The Phoenix
Nike Kama
Next Page
The Empress - Boudoir of Abundance
Tasnim Ismail



A Universe

The whole of hitherto and all hereafter
Taken for granted and the great unknown,
Dark energy, dark matter and dark laughter,
The ripples in a pond caused by a stone,
It is our dark address and day's delight,
A data-factory to contemplate
Where stars of long ago are shining bright
Into the future of some later date.
Anthropocentric in the Anthropocene
When how becomes because and therefore why,
We wonder what both it and we may mean
Where skies are endless and there is no sky,
While voyaging for years light measures distance
And we're brief travellers here to non-existence.

-Duncan Forbes

Here Hither Hence

Where do we go from here
And how did we come hither?
No one remembers that slither
Into the light and air.

How do we travel hence
From now towards forever?
We won't remember that either
When never-endings commence.

-Duncan Forbes

Open the Door

You will want to spend time with him
but first there are things you need to do.
Prepare your house, make it a place
he'll feel at home
and welcome.

Bring order to each room,
discard what you don't need –
the walls are not elastic.
Switch the TV off, put on music,
bring flowers in from the garden.

Keep the paths in your garden clear,
don't overdo pruning,
weeds can be good, embrace trees.
You will extend your boundaries
so forget your picket fence.

You won't get any notice,
be ready when he calls.
Although he a total stranger,
you will know him right away -
be sure to make him welcome.

He won't want your adoration,
won't want you to make a fuss,
invite him in, pull up a chair.
If your house is to his liking,
you'll have everything you want.

-Anne Beck

Voluntary Exile

I am a voluntary exile. I have lived in Vietnam for three years. I am not going back while Putin or his followers are in power.

However, this war ends — in defeat or victory — Russia has already lost. It has lost its brilliant people, its reputation, and the world's trust.

The country I believed in feels drained, exhausted. It no longer feels like it needs me. I used to volunteer and protest. I tried to be an active, responsible citizen. I believed in a free, decent Russia. Then something inside of me broke. I was left with the fragments of my dreams and hopes. I ran out of strength to fight. I told myself leaving was a form of protest. The hard truth is that it wasn't. It was fear and shame.

As Dostoevsky wrote, the worst sin is to betray and destroy yourself for nothing. Life in Vietnam became a bacchanal: dancing, shopping, alcohol, date, empty talks – all vanity, all noise, everything a distraction.

Lost. Broken.

I am still looking for the person I once was- the one who lived and fought for her own principles, her own beliefs. I still hope her soul and mind have not melted under the hot sun of Vietnam.

On 24 February 2022, at 4 a.m. Russia attacked Ukraine. It divided our lives into before and after. Mine was not exception. In the first hours, I kept trying to reach my friend in Western Ukraine on WhatsApp, just to make sure she was safe.

For weeks, neither of us understood what was happening. We talked every day, trying to make sense of reality, trying to hold each other. I posted call for peace and shared reports of Russian soldiers were doing in her country- the messages she sent me.

We tried to keep our friendship alive. But pain slowly drove us apart.

My cousin went to the war to earn money and came back to his mother in a zinc coffin. I could not grieve. To me, he was a murderer. And yet he was still my family. Still a part of me. No one- not even I could support me or share my pain. I felt like a fish thrown onto the sand by a cold wave, gasping for air. The distance between us grew. Pain seeped into every empty space inside me. I still believe we could become close friends again, because the hole it left is one nothing can ever fill.

Why didn't I protest? I tried.

On the first day, I drove to the main square of my city to speak out against the war. Police were everywhere. A few people wandered around, quietly talking about how lonely and devastated, and frightened they felt, knowing that most of their friends, colleagues, and relatives supported the war.

It felt pointless – the most pointless walk of my life.

Speaking out was almost suicide. People were arrested, jailed, or forced to leave the country. Anyone who opposed the war was labeled a traitor, an enemy of Russia.

New laws, new criminal cases, new rules – we were suddenly living in an Orwellian world.

At that time, I worked as an English tutor for children. When I came to teach, parents would

come up to me and start talking, trying to make sense of what was happening in the country.

I had never hidden that I was a member of liberal Yabloko party. Most of them knew where I stood on Putin, and they wanted to know what I thought about the war.

We were all confused. Shocked.

One parent once grabbed me and shook me, trying to convince me that the war was justified, that everything was NATO's and America's fault.

Others said I had brainwashed by Ukrainians through my friend – a woman who was simply terrified for her life. I felt all her fear as if it were my own.

My students asked me what their future would look like. They said they didn't want to live like North Koreans.

VPNs became part of our daily lives.

My brother had worked for the government his whole life, but he chose to resign on the fourth day of the war, trying to keep his conscience clear. Being at two different poles we did not communicate for years. He called my mother and told her I should leave the country.

She was on my side, but her first instinct was to protect me. She began monitoring my Facebook, YouTube, and other social media, watching everything I posted or liked.

She would scream at me, terrified, begging me to stop, to keep quiet, to just leave.

She counted the days until I left, afraid something would happen to me. She had lived through the Soviet era and knew those authorities too well.

Fear settled in our house and made our home life unbearable.

My friends from abroad and my ex boy friend texted me offering me a help to leave the country. I felt confused and lost. It seemed that everyone wanted me to leave.

The day before, most members of Yabloko had posted anti-war statements on Facebook, by morning every post was gone. I called a friend. She refused to talk. Later she told me that the police threatened her.

I sat alone, watching Youtube, crying. Each day it became harder to say out loud what we really thought.

On buses, in shops, in lines, people grew harsher, angrier, almost warlike.

A stranger once asked my mother mockingly how her Ukrainian relatives were doing. She has no none. We just have a Ukrainian surname.

I decided to leave Russia with a heavy heart- to protect my sanity and my freedom.

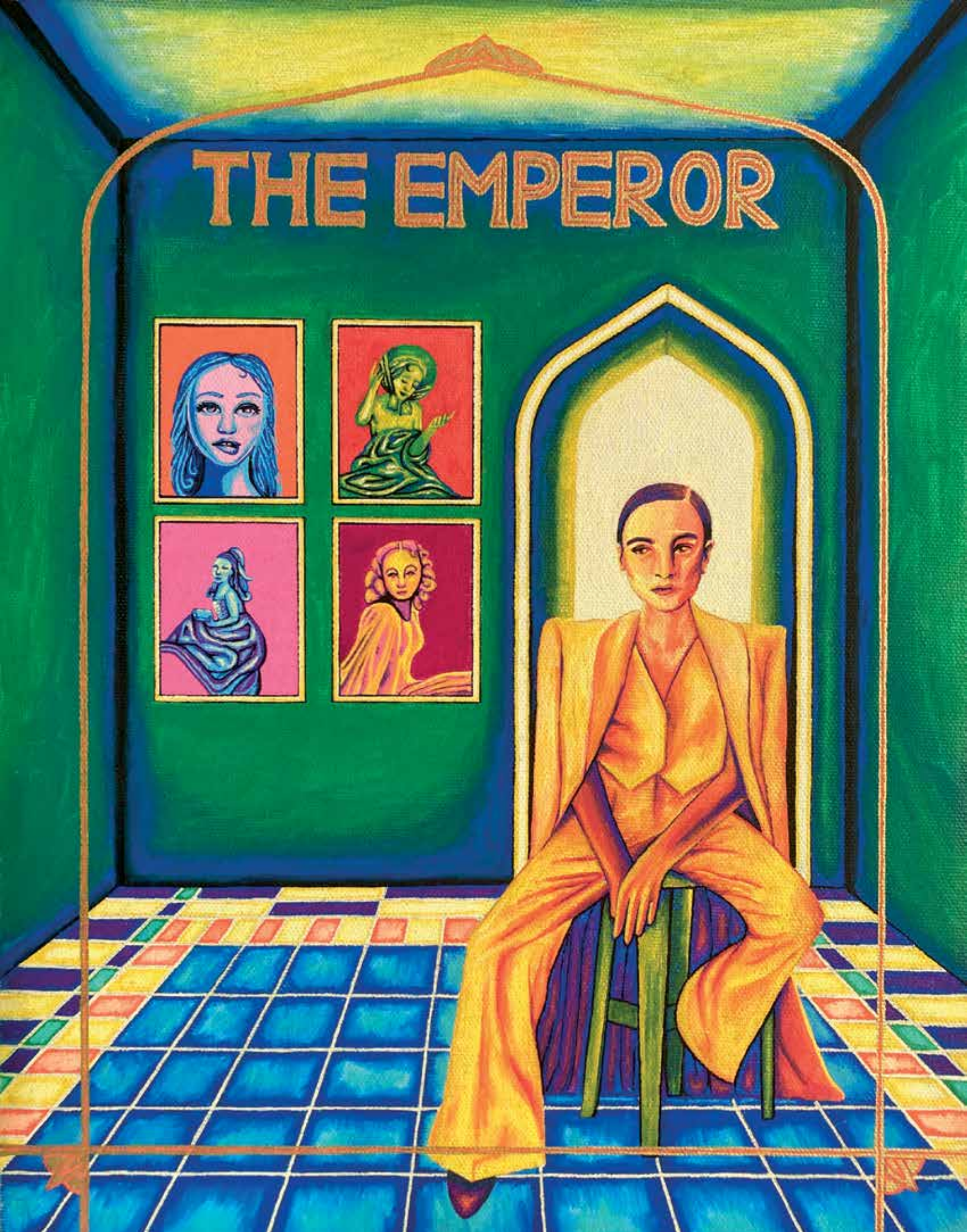
A new passport. Papers. Certificates. A job offer. Tickets. Cash. One suitcase. A new life waiting to begin. It took me almost five months to make it real.

Vietnam. It was not a choice, just the fastest way out.

My mother sat across from me at the kitchen table and asked me to promise that if she died, I wouldn't come back. My brother would take care of everything.

Exile was safer than home ever was.

-Elena Tretyachenko



Beginnings Don't Announce Themselves

Beginnings don't announce themselves
with drums or banners.
They arrive softly
a window left open,
a sentence half-written,
a breath taken without fear.
They look like hesitation.
Like standing still longer than expected.
Like deciding not to go back
to what already broke you.
Sometimes a beginning is only this:
you stayed.
You listened.
You tried again
without promising anything to the future.

-Sonalí Narang

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Transformation
Anna Zhukova



Godlike powers

The child saw herself as a god. A creator with no boundaries, limited only to what she could devise. And to her understanding, there was nothing she couldn't.

She recognized this power very early. Once, her parents gifted her a blank piece of paper and colored crayons. When she looked at them, unclear of what to do, they revealed, "You can create anything you want."

On the first line traced, she understood the magic she held. The single sheet could become her house, her family, the park, the zoo, a cloud of colors, or more. The possibilities were endless.

At the height of her dominion, she would lay papers, canvases, clay, and any other material where her powers would manifest and stare at them.

But she would also feel stared at.

Then she learned the second lesson about her powers. As much as a goddess of creation, she had to assume the role of the one of destruction. For one cannot come to be without the other.

Just as a beginning creates and encapsulates all the potential in what it starts, its ending will cull all of those possibilities, discarding them. With the exception of one. The one it conjures into reality. To bring life to one creation, she needs to destroy all the other versions that exist in the realm of potentiality.

But she wanted only to create, not to destroy.

When she drew a hill, infinite paintings appeared. A house could be built there. Giraffes could be wandering the area. Maybe cowboys travelling or giants guarding a princess. The hill could be so much. And because of that, it remained but a hill.

She began writing: "Once, there was a mighty wizard," and in her mind, his story sprawled into all manner of adventures, romances, tragedies, mysteries, horrors, and mundane situations. But the wizard could not live each of those, at least not on that sheet of paper. And how could she limit his life? How could she deny him those experiences? For that, he had none.

She didn't have the strength or cruelty that a goddess of destruction demands. To her, it was a wasteful role. To burn away so much. To forget so many sceneries. Impeding so many experiences for her characters.

The child spent what felt like an eternity for her with beginnings. New paintings, pieces, models, stories, and any form she found for creation. She wanted to create art. Yet, blocking her way was the third goddess in herself. The goddess of choice. For this deity refused to accept her role.

The force of creation would explode in a myriad of ideas, the responsible for choice would reject intervening, and the destructive one could not embrace her role.

So the Void filled the empty lines and pages. And the child met her nemesis. Unsuspecting, the entity crept into each unrealized space left. When the infant looked around, she was surrounded and froze. Anxiety climbed through her. Fear corrupted her authority.

"Leave it be," whispered the Void in her mind. "Those are mine now. This is my reign."

And leave she did. Fled as far as she could to where no material or trappings could invoke her enemy. Surrounded only by a street and nature, she breathed relieved. Here she would not need to deal with him. She was at peace. As long as she denied her divinity. The three goddesses in her.

Seeing the trees, she felt the wind pick up and grabbed a twig from the grass. The child laid on the grass and stared at the blue sky.

An explosion. A silent one.

Her twig was now a wand, a sword, a cane, a rifle, a popsicle, a miniature tree, one spaceship out of three, a telescope, a microscope, a timescope, and a selfscope. She stopped. The selfscope was powerful. With it, she saw herself. And just like the pristine paper, she held all the potential.

Another explosion. In an instant she saw reflections of herself multiplying, each different. She saw all she could become. And all that she would need to destroy. Finally, she comprehended that while she didn't select a version of herself to become, she left empty where it was to be manifested. And then it could be taken by her foe.

That she would not allow. She chose to rebuff any space for it. In choosing, she destroyed, and she became.

It was not harmless, but any pain or sadness she felt for the forms that were left behind was dismal compared to the pride and satisfaction she had for turning into something new. And finally, she had achieved and created something new.

Her powers were now flowing with all the capacity they held. Creation, choice, and destruction.

She scraped the twig on the street and began to form a horizon. Thousands of forms came to her mind. The kid smiled, grabbed a rock, and drew. After many lines, she had a fort. One impenetrable to the Void, since it was finished. It was not a perfect drawing. She would favor some colors, and a moat would be awesome. But now she could fight back.

That version of the child was courageous and decided. And marched back to meet her adversary.

Upon entering the Void's reign, the villain rose from the scattered materials. "There is nowhere to run. I will fill and control all of your incomplete pieces. You can only make me greater."

The child stopped. She looked around. Sheets all over the floor and tables. Then she found it. A single black pen over some papers. She went to get it.

"Accept your limitations. Embrace your failings."

His advice was good, but those were not her limitations, and as long as she kept trying, she knew they were not failures. He lied to control her.

The Void, seeing the girl approach on the implement, jumped to her legs and held the child in place.

Its strength was too much for her. Her legs gave. On her knees, over the thin white rectangles, she would not reach the tool. She has given too much space for him to grow.

So she would take it back.

Her dextrous hands took one of the sheets and folded it in half.

Laughing, the attacker whispered, "This won't change anything. You can even tear or crumple the paper. They are mine."

She disagreed. Because the paper was not being destroyed, it was being defined. Among all it could get turned into, she chose an airplane, and with a few precise movements and one agile launch, it flew.

No longer was it empty, so no longer did it empower her enemy. And she felt the pressure on the right leg give.

It was time to continue. She created a boat, then a frog, and decided to challenge herself by creating a fox. The fox came out wrinkled and weird, but it was still a fox, and when the Void tried to hold onto it, it was bitten.

With this assault, she was free to stand and run. And so she did. With the pen in her hand, she got the papers that held the beginnings of drawings. The possibilities rose from them. She breathed them in and chose what meant more to her at that moment. The valley would now house a blacksmith in the midst of forging a helmet. In the ocean, she gave life to a giant squid playing with a submarine. The one with a sun, she included rockets travelling towards the moon. She found colored pencils under some papers and later crayons, paint, clay, glue, and much more.

Each completed piece drained the creature of energy, making it smaller and less powerful. "Cease this! Your unfinished works are mine, and they are too many. You can't win."

But she knew what those works were. "Unfinished" was not their final state. They could be whole. It depended on her to make it so. And so she did. After hours of dedication all but one final sheet was filled.

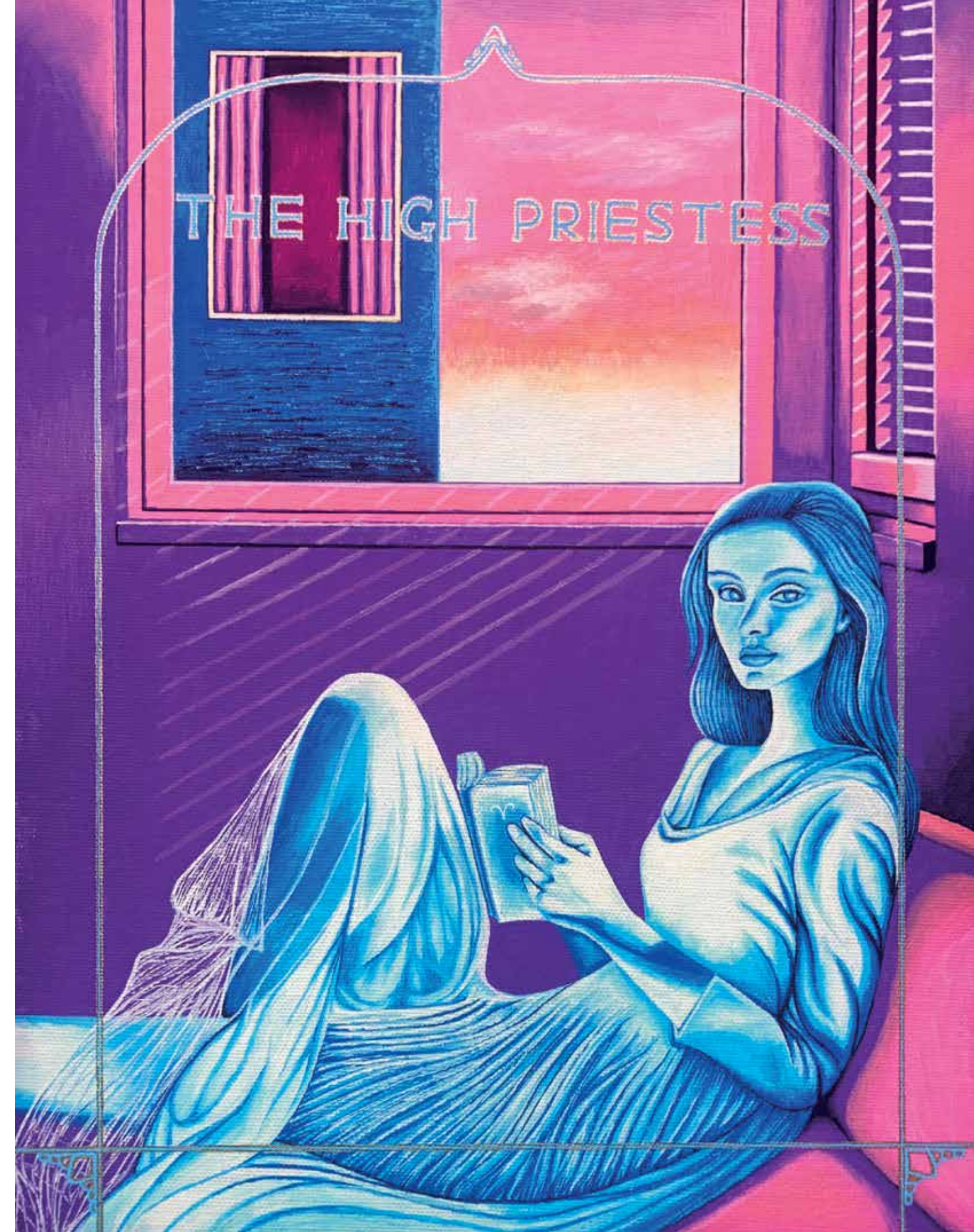
As a goddess of choice, she became precise, just, and decisive. As one of creation, she was powerful, inexorable, and a multitude. And about being the goddess of destruction, she changed her perspective. She was not wasteful but pragmatic, for she needed space to create more. The possibilities were destroyed, but not lost. They became the source for new inspiration, improving on previous ones. And it was never a cruel position, but a merciful one, because she realized that each possibility was holding back one full realization. And the sooner she went on with accepting that, the more she would bring to life.

The weakened almost minuscule foe held himself on the last page available, his whispers too low to reach her.

The child took a pencil and reflected on how to fill the last blank page holding the Void. After a few seconds she started writing.

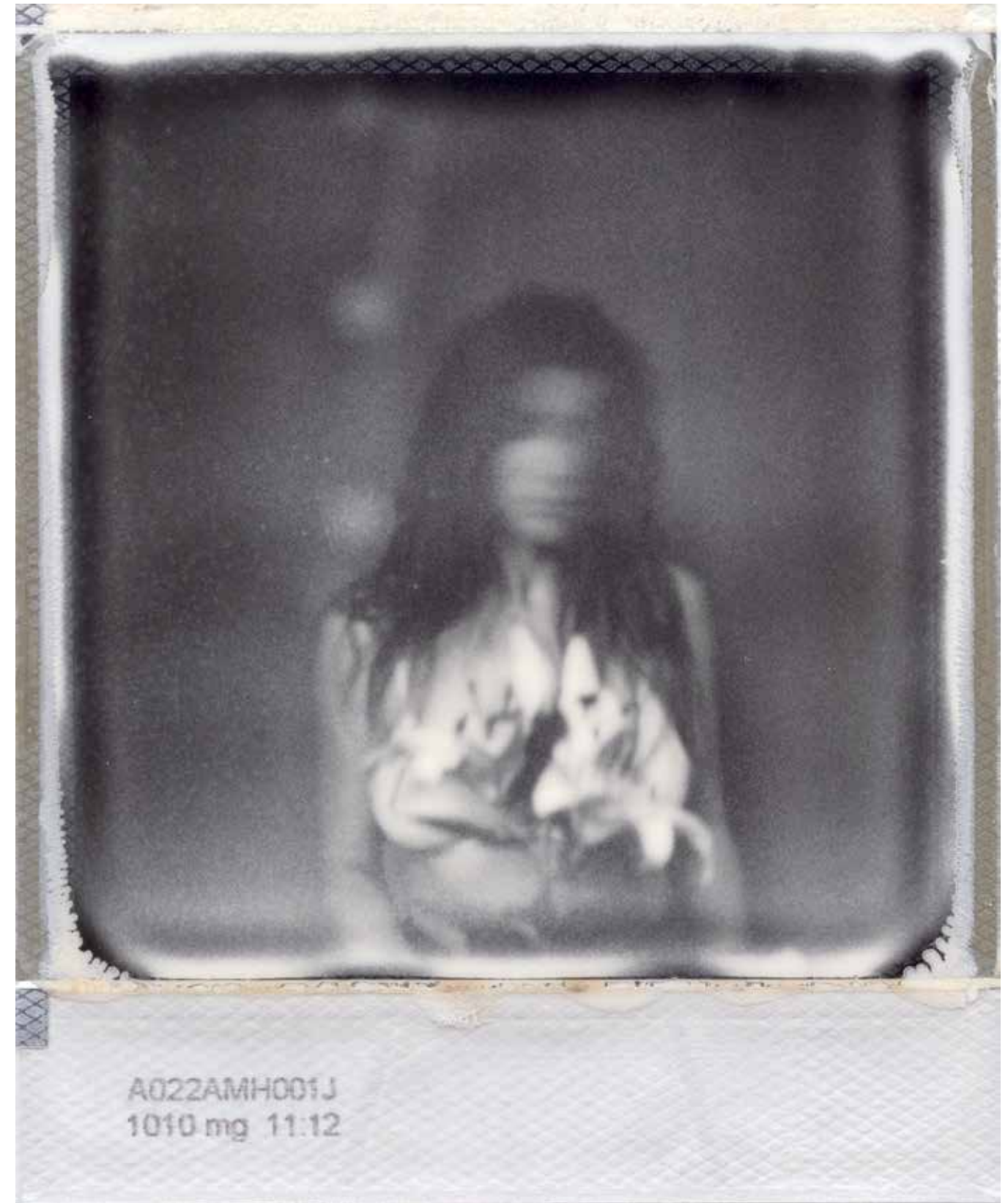
- Gabriel Kolisch

The High Priestess - Sanctuary of Enigma
Tasnim Ismail





Mega City
Cliff Tisdell



You and I Will Soon Be Dust
Veronik Mol

The Last Train Out

She closed the book, placed it on a table, and finally decided to walk through the door.

It was time.

In fact, it was past time.

Hot, humid air slammed into her chest, almost taking her breath away. It was as if she had stepped into a furnace. Beads of sweat began trickling down Laura's side, tickling the two-day old stitches, making her desperately wanting to scratch. Laura flexed her right leg. The bruise ran from her hip to the side of her knee. She put some weight onto it. It hurt, but the bones and muscles all held.

Dust motes swirled around her in the air, each of them reflecting a bit of the late afternoon gloom. It smelled as if someone had been smoking. No. It smelled like someone had died. But it was just smog. No respiratory warnings had been posted. These days respirators always needed to be worn. She couldn't remember the last time they weren't.

Nearby, a lone acacia hung heavily in the heat, trying to hold on until the next rain. It would have a long wait.

Laura glanced at her watch and sighed. She was late.

She slung a tattered, faded brown leather backpack over her shoulder. All of her possessions were in it and still there was plenty of room for more...

A moment later she heard the rhythmic pop, pop, pop of gunshots. The conflict sounded faint and distant but were in the opposite direction of where she was heading. She stood silent and listened for retaliatory shots, but surprisingly none came. That was good. A week earlier the fighting had gone on through the night.

A late model Mercedes slowly passed by. It was dented and faded with a layer of soot that made it difficult to determine its original color. The windows were down allowing her to see the man behind the steering wheel. A worn and weather-beaten scowl was chiseled onto his face. Large, cold eyes glared as his tongue licked his lips. With a metallic squeal the car came to a stop.

Laura reached behind her back until her fingers wrapped against the grip of her gun. The glare she gave made him think twice about possible intentions. There would be no raping here today. The man stepped on the accelerator and the vehicle sped off, belching out a small cloud of grey smoke as it did so.

She glanced at her watch. She had twenty minutes left to reach a train that was twenty-five minutes away. It was the last one out until Sunday and she had long since overstayed her welcome.

She kept to the middle of the crater ridden street. The sidewalks strayed too close to darkened alleys and the unspeakable horrors for which many of them held.

Halfway to the train station she passed by the firebombed remains of an old pick-up. Weeds sprouted from the engine and the tires, long since deflated, looked like they were being swallowed up by the earth.

Laura kept to a pace that her leg could withstand. The train would wait for no one,

and of old Mercedes prowling the streets were the least of her concerns.

The last of the passengers were loading onto the train as she approached. There had been a train station here once but all that remained now were tracks and a few stone walls. The lone conductor looked at her warily as she approached but after flashing what passed as currency at him, he gestured for her to get on board.

"Destination?" he asked.

She looked at the man. "Does it matter?"

"No," he replied, wiping his brow with his stained shirt sleeve. "I guess it really doesn't."

-Michael Penncavage



bird nest acorns
Jennifer Pratt-Walter



A Discussion about order 3
Zhe Yang

A Plumber is a Useful Thing

I sigh as my mind dawdles on a dream
of kissing him amid flanges & faucets
The upstairs bathroom sink won't go down,
& nobody has been down on me in quite a spell

A plumber is a useful thing—
Maybe too useful since my house is old,
since my pipes are corroded
since my spigots drip

He's 11 years younger than me
My toilet is older than him
The thought didn't escape me
as he told me the year it was made

He had gently put it back together,
& I thought how gently he could lift me
in whatever adventure we would have

A plumber is a useful thing
my coworkers tell me with glee—
Go on his hike, for God's sake,
& ride that man's motorcycle

He's extremely honest—
Men like that are hard to find
& plumbers like that even harder

He's over 30, my brother says
& rolls his eyes
But do we want to lose a plumber
if things implode or explode?

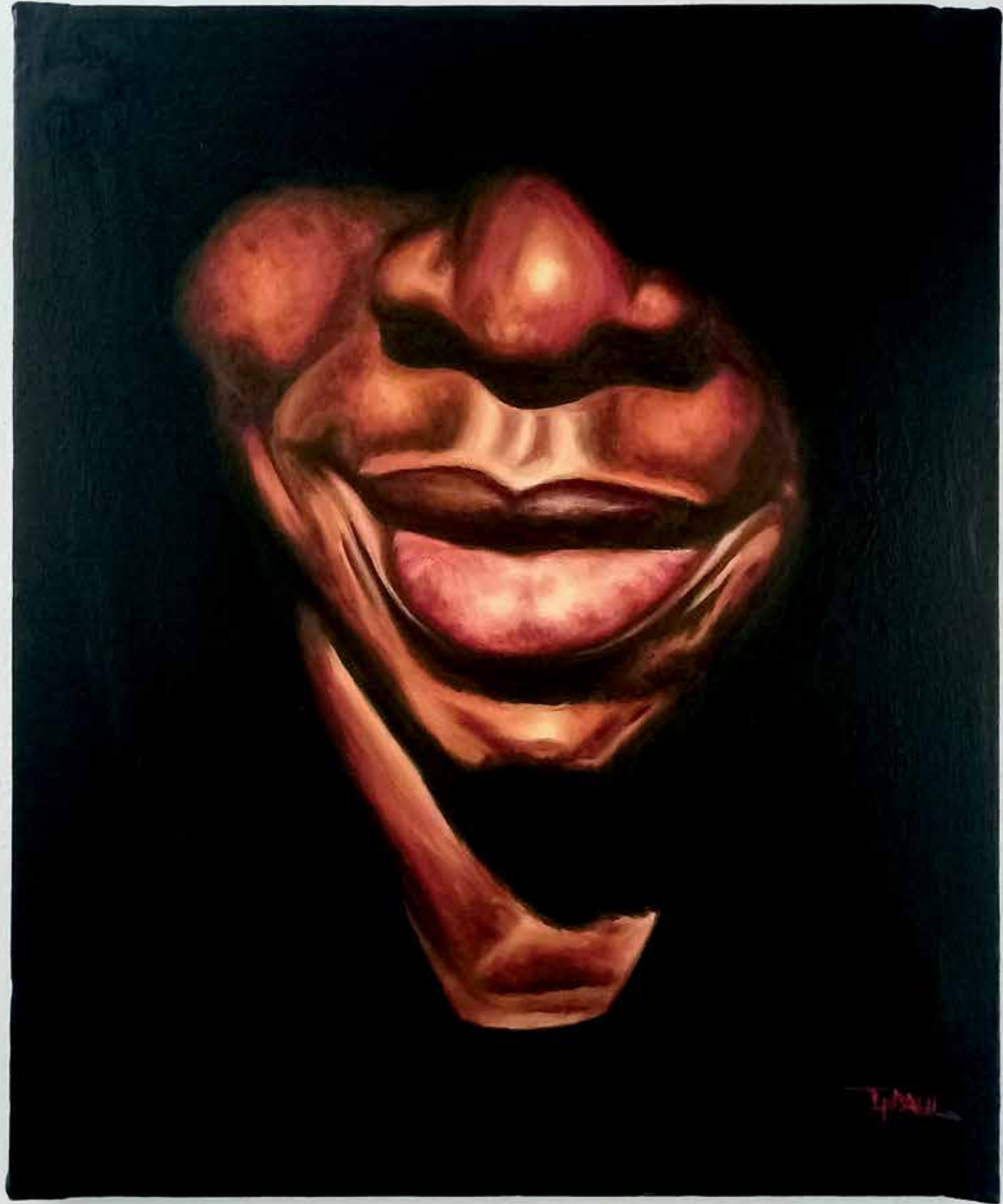
A plumber is a useful thing—
more useful than most other professions,
more useful around my house
& useful in the bedroom when there is a problem

I think of him teaching me the language
of water. I think of him making me wet
in all the right areas that don't leak
or gurgle. I think of saying *my plumber*
& meaning it more carnally than business.

A plumber is a useful thing—
Some of the uses I blush to say.
Some of the uses I cannot say aloud
but whisper them to the pipes.

- Faith-Anne Bell

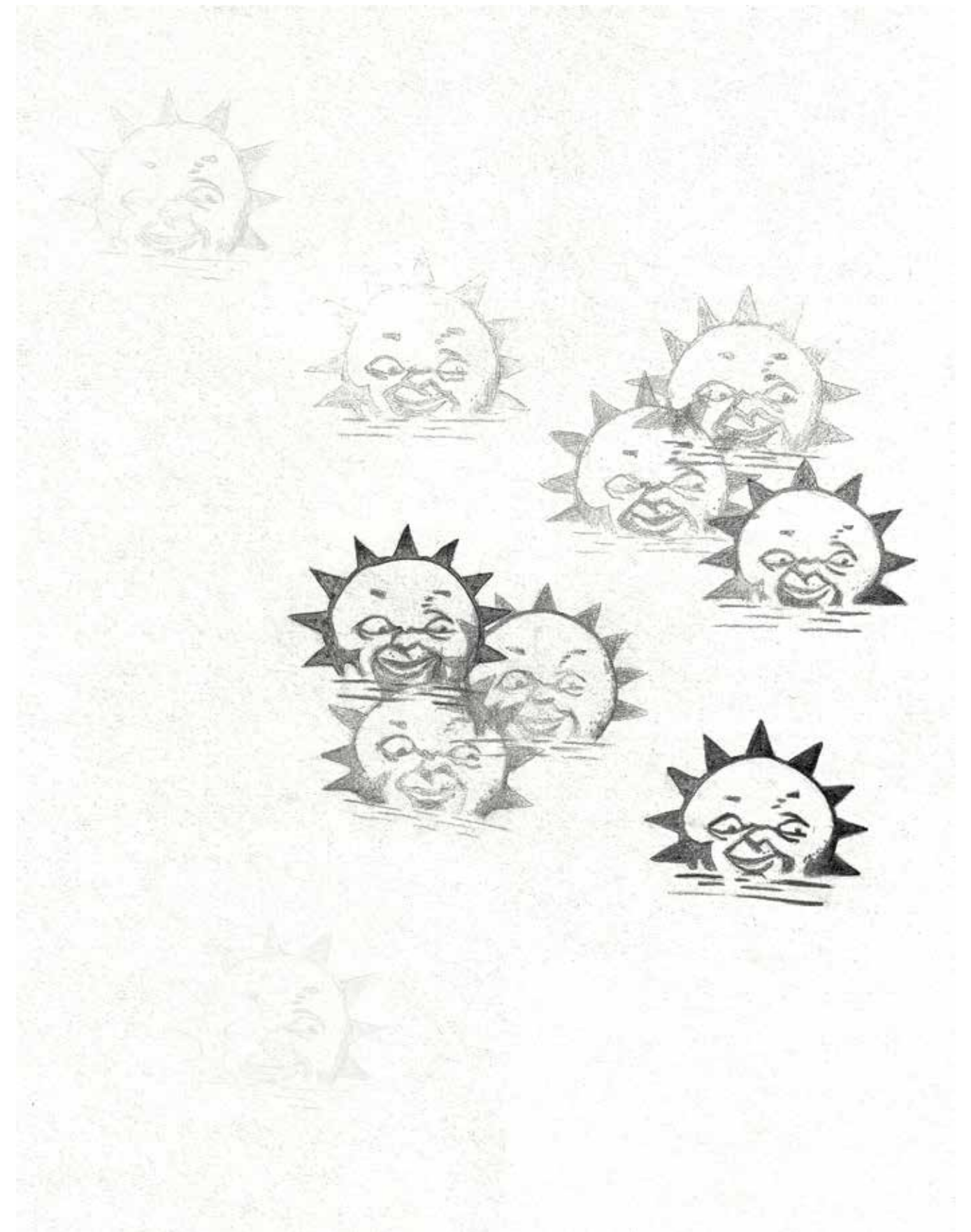
Next Pages
Dawn
The Vision
Ilevbaoje Franca



Fourteen-line poem with some luck

You sat next to the last empty chair, and I
was late. If you were persistent, only as
a stone column stays. One night, my corduroys
whished behind you down trails until the sky
clicked and whirred, meteor upon meteor
streaking the dry grasses. It was cold. We joke
that it came down to survival, that first touch.
And it did. A buckeye, self-burnished,
stays on the counter where I put it.
Becomes quite ordinary, really, except
for how I keep seeing it. If I ever see
Stonehenge, I'll put luck back where it came from:
a forgotten way of marking. Of moving
what should be far too heavy to lift.

-Erin Redfern



*Attempts
Rivianna*

Visiting the Ice God at Exit Glacier

Ice cracks and groans on glaciers. They're ever moving beneath themselves. Rolling wholesale over rocks and boulders far in the layers under all that ice.

In the dark, I leave the tent and my snoring companions behind to stand on the whispering glacier under a crescent moon. Stars wink overhead. In my red stockinged feet, I whirl my arms out, spinning in the breeze, wearing my green striped pajamas. My spirit levitates amongst it all in wonder.

This was what I'd come for—this moment on Exit Glacier when I discovered what ice could do to a human heart. Only, I didn't know it until it happened.

At the trailhead that morning, I picked up a glacier-scarred rock and turned it in my hand. A cold sheen caught the light like the icefield had rubbed off its essence. The surface was etched with parallel grooves—fine, precise lines that marked the glacier's relentless footprints. These hinted at claws strong enough to strangle stone. A testament to ice's patient violence.

I pocketed the treasure.

And now I seek to internalize another gift: Dancing on ice by myself, beneath the sky on a glacier. I, who'd never been in love, not really and truly, now fell head over heels.

Literally. I fell and somersaulted on the slick ice.

Oh well! Got back up again and faced the white wonder that didn't disappear in darkness. The ice god's luminescence glows from within. The song I imagined matching my steps to came to me: Chopin's "Nocturne," gentle, melodic, radiant. I'd played it for a piano recital in my fourteenth year.

Like the ice, gentle, melodic, radiant.

Now, at 19 years old, I didn't want to be a pest. But no way was I not going to beg my way onto this trip with my new barista co-workers. Jenny served as manager at Aftershock Espresso while Sam built the panini sandwiches customers ordered.

"Sure, we'll take you," Jenny announced three weeks previously. I jumped up and down in the coffee shop. I didn't care who saw me.

"But," Jenny said. "It's cold and wet, and I don't want a complainer around, Lilly. It's a glacier, for God's sake."

"Cross my heart," I told them.

After driving the highway for three hours, Jenny, Sam, and I began our trek at the Exit Glacier's visitors center on an Indian summer day, warmth reaching beyond 60°. Hiking the trail grew sweaty in a mosquito-humming forest of yellowing birch. The climb took less than an hour to reach above the tree line. It brought us out of the bugs.

Jenny and Sam, lovers who think their status is secret, can't hide that they've fought. We plow upward with them, stealing glances at each other. Feels like a loud conversation, though the air is utterly devoid of words.

"I'll take the sled," is Sam's only utterance. He hikes a Nike hat higher on the mop of his

curling blonde hair. He reaches for the sled line.

"No, I've got it," Jenny flips her long ponytail, flashes her blue eyes.

Jenny's the only one who has been on a glacier before. For Sam and me, this is a first.

"One you'll never forget," Jenny told us back when we were making plans. "Like a first kiss."

Thus, we entered the glacier by taking that crossover step onto the icy tongue that extends down the mountain. Not quite like a waterfall, though its shape is certainly that. Only thicker by many feet of depth and marbled in blues and grays.

Where the icefield began, we put cleats on our boots and took out our poles. Now the ice formed a plateau in waves. We shouldered backpacks and dragged a wooden sled behind, happily burdened with sleeping bags and a tent. No bearskin blanket for us, as the naturalist John Muir towed on his glacier in 1890, Jenny said. But our bags are expedition strength, guaranteed to keep us warm in sub-zero cold, costing more than we should have splurged.

"Exit is predicted to be extinct by 2100, given its rapid decline," Sam mutters at Jenny, apparently eager to contribute to the shared pool of knowledge.

Already it's clawed to a corner of the mountain, melted into a three-mile triangle of its once giant self.

The rolling sea of aquamarine blue spreads as far as the eye can see. As we consider where to set up camp, the choices are limited by melting pools and seracs that rise in the bluest pyramidal shapes.

"We'll need a dry spot to camp," Jenny says as we move as far inland as impediments allow.

The yawning maws of crevasses warn us to watch each movement. We stop often in bedazzled awe.

Jenny and Sam seem to forget what ailed them.

At some point, we pull out lunch and sit amongst boulders.

No peanut butter and jelly sandwich ever tasted better.

We find our camp spot on a relatively level plain of windswept glacier. We erect the tent, pounding pins through stubborn ice, and set up a small stove on a boulder. Being the smallest, Jenny fits perfectly in the sled for her bed. She rolls out her olive-green sleeping bag upon it.

The sled's wooden slats creak beneath her as she lies down on it, trying it out.

"I'm in heaven," she whispers, shaking out her long brown hair from its ponytail.

"You look like a picture!" I say and snap one.

Sam and I unfurl our own rubber mats and fill them with air.

"We're going to get wet, but at least we'll float," Sam jokes.

I feel buoyant at the thought of being on a glacier. Each step falls as light as the sunshine

air.

The rest of the day, we hike an area about two miles across, spying on the puckers and indentations, trying to piece together the demise of ice and the uplift from last winter's snowfall. We carry the benefit of writings by glaciologists, which Jenny reads aloud when we stop to rest. She's a biology student at the University of Alaska Anchorage.

We search for ice worms and don't find any.

Snow is a glacier's best friend, Jenny says. Its accumulation gives lifeblood to the corpus, while its melt subtracts from it.

"These records sit in layer upon layer, like a tiered cake's exposure once sliced," Jenny says.

As we trek across Exit, the barren landscape seems devoid of life. No birds sing here. Though bears use it for a highway, no animals frequent a glacier – there's nothing to forage for here. Yet in rare pockets where wind-blown soil finds purchase, stubborn lichen took root atop the ice. Lichen is the first organism to appear on exposed glacial rocks.

"Life, we realize, seizes the slimmest opportunity to flourish," Jenny says.

Looking at the lichen moss, my eyes tear up. To think it all starts somewhere like this humble scratch of thatch on a rock.

When night falls, we don't immediately head inside to the tent. It's still light out past 11 p.m. Instead, Jenny, Sam, and I linger outside, sitting on boulders around our cook stove, which gives off propane heat. The stove is parked on a boulder to keep the heat from damaging the ice.

"So your first glacier," Jenny says, taking in Sam and me. "How tall are you, Lilly?"

"Who, me? Why, I'm five-eight. What are you asking for?"

"I want you to imagine something. This glacier used to be the equivalent of a much taller building, say. Like it would be eight or nine of you, Lilly, standing high. All this climate change over the century has shrunk it."

I try to picture what Exit Glacier used to be.

"One day it really will all melt away, won't it?" Sam says, holding his bare palms over the heat of the stove.

"Somewhere in our grandchildren's time." Jenny might not mean them personally, but Sam seems to take it that way. He glows in a grin that fills his dark eyes with the reflected firelight.

I don't want to interfere with all this passive conversation erupting around me.

I duck inside the tent and read by the light of a lamp pulled on like a headband. I can't even concentrate, but wait until Sam and Jenny come inside and drift swiftly off to sleep. Then I get up and tiptoe outside in my stockinged feet. My red socks cut a keen contrast with the marbled blue and white ice.

I dance until I stumble and fall, laughing at myself in the darkness. The glacier catches me

in its cold embrace. I get up and spin again, this time more carefully, feeling the ancient ice shift and groan beneath my socks.

This is my own love affair beginning. Not with a person, but with something wild and impossible and dying. The glacier whispers to me through the music—I imagine its creaks and cracks harmonizing with Chopin's melody.

When my feet finally go numb, I tiptoe back to the tent and my sleeping bag and zip it to my chin. Through the tent fabric, I can still hear the ice singing in the breeze. What a strange gift, to fall in love with a massive spread of ice, vulnerable and gorgeous. I am ready to sleep now. For I have danced with a melting ice god.

-Naomi Klouda



Leaving
Hou Wei I

The Stories We Are

It all starts with a husk cast off, with
breath/light/spark passing through
a veil of light/energy/dark matter.
It all starts with an invasion and
the body's losing battle, armored
with oxygen and morphine.
It all starts with walking downstairs
with a laundry basket and
that one trick knee.
It all starts with twenty seven years
of leaving and coming home.
It all starts with being rent in two,
with the miracle of her/him/not you.
It all starts with a clammy hand, held
in a dark theatre or back seat.
It all starts with a first bleed.
It all starts with a father leaving,
a mother crying in the kitchen.
It all starts with a stray dog whelping
under a grandmother's bed.
It all starts with a broken mouse
wrapped in Kleenex, kept in a
matchbox under socks and underwear,
with a whispered prayer to Mary
every night to *pleasepleaseplease*
raise the mouse from the dead.
It all starts with choosing a parent
or two, choosing a place and time,
and breathing *Itself* into a new body.
It all starts somewhere else, some other
planet maybe, some different time,
a husk cast off, another breath/light/spark
passing through another veil.
It all comes down to these stories
called *Self* we invent, embellish,
complicate, edit, press
onto a blank white page.

-Marcella Remund

Reproductive

I don't know how I expected it to start, but I didn't expect it to start like that. Nicole and I had met online through one of the dating apps and she seemed easy enough to talk to. She mentioned her ex-boyfriend on the video call, which was sort of a pink flag, but whatever, you can't be too picky or else you'll be alone forever.

For our first date in person, it was a little tricky to come up with things to do. A few venues were starting to open up and we both had our shots, but a lot of places were shut down and it was cold as fuck outside.

I'd heard of, but never been to, the Museum of Contemporary Photography, something down near Columbia. Whatever it was, it was centrally located, vaguely artsy and meaningful-ish.

The exhibit had said something about *women's rights* or *history* or *struggle* or some such. There was too much punctuation in the title and I stopped reading. I figured it would go over well and reservations could be made. Done.

I arrived, dressed winter-date casual, which for Chicago is something between a well-bundled homeless person and business casual. February is cold enough I usually pick my clothes out in the dark, but I hadn't been out on a date in a long time. My last dating excursion had ended in a very awkward encounter I'd rather not speak of.

I put on a collared shirt, some corduroy pants, even found matching gloves and a clean hat. I got there a little early, went through the heat-sensing index that checked for elevated temperature, visited the bathroom and fixed my hat hair, then sat down and waited in the lobby.

She arrived late, in some sort of patterned jacket that didn't quite match the rest of her ensemble. As we got unbundled on the way into the exhibit making chitchat, we examined each other surreptitiously. *Are you who you say you are?*

No sooner had we entered the exhibit than I looked up to see what appeared to be a gigantic, twenty-foot-tall, blood-covered, paper-mache uterus sculpture adorning the wall.

Oh boy.

"Well, this is intense!" she said brightly and smiled.

"Yeah, I...uh...they do some interesting things in this space..."

"I thought it was your first time here?"

"Well, yes, that's...right. I hear, though, it's got a lot of...you know...things going on here. Tell me about your family," I stammered as we read letters from incarcerated women describing traumatizing prison abortions with coat hangers in visceral detail. The coat hangers used by the women during the abortions littered the walls, elegantly framed.

"Well, I have two brothers. They live out in the suburbs." Her eyes scanned the letters carefully, not looking at mine.

"This one is from Panama! Have you ever been to Panama?"

"I haven't. Closest I've come is Costa Rica. Beautiful place," I said. Although, at the moment, with my brain scanning frantically for relevant details, the only thing about Costa

Rica I could recall was that the monkeys there could spit a fatal poison in your eye.

The next letter we read was from a doctor describing his experiences treating the women who had undergone these baby removals behind the walls of the prison yard, and the guards who carried them out for a fee.

I cursed myself for not reading the exhibit's blurb closer. It was a photography museum for chrissake! There was supposed to be lovely framing (check), good spacing and lighting (check, check)...and pictures celebrating women. *Wrong.*

"Did you like Panama?" I queried, desperately trying to redirect the conversation.

"Oh, I've never been."

"Ah. Well, it sounds like the yelp reviews agree it's not a great place to get an abortion." Fuck it, if I was going out I was going out with a bang.

"Yeah...so I hear. I get all of my abortions domestically. Better logistics."

Touche. A worthy adversary. In the next room, we overheard the screams of...well, I'm not sure...*women?* Possibly? Possibly in labor? Possibly...getting...*right, of course.* The content was so graphic that in order to enter this particular part of the exhibit you had to agree to leave your phone behind, locked up in a plastic case at the desk with some asexual creature from the university, bleary-eyed from her campus job safeguarding traumatizing abortion porn from prying strangers.

However, I had chosen this exhibit and I couldn't back out now. I gritted my teeth and prepared to plunge in headfirst. Mercifully, she said, "I don't need to see this, *necessaribly*, do you?"

"I think I'm ok on skipping that if you don't mind," I countered diplomatically, coughing as my throat became extremely dry.

So we skipped the abortion footage and went upstairs. She continued telling me about her suburban family, nieces, nephews, the screaming of the unborn in the background forming our afternoon soundtrack.

"So, there's a lot of postal workers in your family?" I managed.

"It's true." Her hazel eyes and shiny hair had settled on an image in the not too distant foreground. A photographer had taken a picture of...her removed uterus on a metal plate.

"Well. That. That is a...a memorable image," I sputtered.

She looked at me, wide-eyed for a moment, then burst out laughing.

"I'm really glad you suggested this. *And not me!* Can you imagine? If this was my idea, you'd be running out of here."

"Probably," I conceded. We couldn't get out of the museum fast enough, bundling up and walking toward the lake. It was a long-ass walk in the cold. The lake was frozen, the river was frozen, the world was frozen. We came to a pier by the edge of the lake, near the harbor by Buckingham Fountain. The spigots were still and empty, the details on the open fish mouths puckering pointlessly into the air, strangely deserted like the relics of a past civilization. As we approached the pier, Nicole excitedly asked me,

“Do you think it’s thick enough to walk on?”

“I don’t know,” I said, peering over the edge. I’d feel better if somebody else went first,” assuming no one would be. Off in the distance, way out by the planetarium, we saw some other brave morons walking on it. I shrugged. She hopped down onto the ice and started immediately. I tentatively lowered myself down, putting only half my weight on my right leg. She skipped out ahead.

“After -3 it feels so warm! Do you skate?”

“Not really,” I said, as I furiously calculated the distance and strength that would be needed to pull her back through the ice if her calculations about ice thickness were wrong.

“I love to skate!”

Right, right, the roller derby...she had mentioned something about that. No one fell through the ice and I felt like a giant pussy for being so cautious. It didn’t seem to bother her though. We had a vigorous debate about time travel and religion. We stopped to get coffee along the way and continued our nervous, frozen, caffeinated chatter from the lake all the way up the river to Michigan Avenue, stammering out new and exciting sentences faster and louder as we went, as though we were the first bipeds to discover language. The sun kept basking us in encouragement as we picked and plodded our way along the riverwalk.

Along the bridge over Michigan Avenue, a giant icebreaking ship came along and started cracking up the ice in the river. Wordlessly we stared out at it, transfixed by its slow and steady crunching until our faces went numb. She was somehow an electrician, a former roller derby star, and presently a therapist. I was intrigued. I’d always found therapists to be mentally unbalanced themselves and generally tried to avoid them, but she didn’t seem to take herself too seriously, and if she was diagnosing me she was doing it very subtly.

As we worked our way along a relatively calm Michigan Avenue, we passed a homeless guy on the way singing a song. She gave him some money as I shook my head. A bleeding heart, this would never work.

“You’re not feeling it?”

“Nah, fuck ‘em,” I said, testing.

“Maybe he needs it, maybe he doesn’t. I don’t care what he does with it. I’m in a good mood,” she said and flipped her hair nonplussed.

We ate ravenously at the restaurant. We’ve both always liked to eat, that was clear from the start. Fuck starving. I don’t believe in missing meals. We were on the patio, a plastic curtained-off area that had sprung up in the covid winter to help the restaurants stay afloat. Some jackass was smoking weed out there since he was technically ‘outside.’ It was strong and super annoying.

We swapped stories about our mental illnesses and began comparing medications. She sang opera in college. We were two artsy motherfuckers dragged into the real world of human services. She seemed to actually enjoy helping people a lot more than I did. She was a better person than I was, maybe that’s what attracted me to her first. I hadn’t ever cared much about that aspect of a woman, I’m a slow learner I guess. How they treat everyone else is how they’ll treat you most of the time. I had mostly gone for girls that liked to talk shit about people.

She let me pick up the check. I wasn’t sure how far she was down the feminist slope, but since she didn’t get a huge ladyboner for the screaming abortion exhibit I figured we could make it work.

We decided to take the El back toward the car, having gotten our steps in for the day.

“So, what are you doing with the rest of your evening?” Nicole said, picking up one of my gloves that had fallen as we waited for the red line.

“Oh nothing much, just relaxing.”

My slow lizard brain picked it up eventually. In my mind, it was a lot for a first date, museum visit, walk, dinner. Trying to do too much on a first date just makes you seem desperate and pathetic. But fuck it, I hadn’t gotten laid in more than a year and we seemed to be hitting it off. Why not?

“You wanna hang out for a little while?” I offered.

“Sure,” she said as nonchalantly as possible, kicking lightly at the ground, but clearly pleased. When she smiled at me I felt like if the whole world ended tonight, so what? That wouldn’t be so bad. So we got off at Harrison and took her car back to my place. It was a banged up Honda with the hubcaps stolen on one side. Practical.

We had to park a ways from the house because of the snow. We were barely in the door with boots off before we started. We couldn’t wipe the smiles off our faces. I’m not the type to kiss and tell so use your imagination for the rest of it, you pack of perverts.

-Nathan Cover



Life Goals

One of my goals in life,
to live another day,
free of political ads,
free of confrontations,
free of stormy weather,
free of confusion,
so I stayed inside the house,
not turning on the television,
not turning on the radio,
not logging into my computer,
and everything went well,
like living in my mother's womb,
hidden from the rest of the world,
letting me live on for another day.

-Duane Anderson

My Future on a Post-It Note

Tap, tap, tap, tap. I didn't realize I was drumming my pen on my desk. She told me years later.

The air was suddenly stagnant and I felt a bead of sweat under my collar. My jaw seemed to be locked shut which was just as well because I had no clue what to say.

She was still standing there, just inside the doorway of my office. Expectant. Waiting for an answer, her confident smile beginning to fade.

That smile. Whenever we passed each other in the hallway, it would turn my brain to putty. It would instantly erase whatever bullshit legal conundrum was rattling around in my litigation-deadened brain. It tongue-tied me so that all that ever came out in response to her sunny greetings was "Uh . . . hallo."

Tap, tap, tap, tap. She was smart and athletic and poised and beautiful. Her cornflower-blue eyes sparkled with boldness and humor. And her smile, did I mention her smile? There was way more than happy going on. There was innuendo. A cloaked invitation. A tantalizing hint of intimacy and adventure and joy.

And now it was explicit. She had just asked me out. Holy shit. Holy shitttt!

Tap, tap, tap, tap. And, yes. Of course. In a heartbeat. *I* would have asked *her* out if we did not work in the same office. But we did. And I had a rule. And there were really good reasons for it.

Actually, one really good reason. A prior office romance that had ended badly. So badly that not only my ex, but all of her pals at the office, and anyone else she could think to tell about it, ended up silently glaring at me whenever I walked by. For months. Like I was some kind of plague-infected serial killer.

Thus the rule.

Tap, tap, tap, tap. And, of course, there was the minor complication that I already had a date tonight. Which, truth be told, was the real reason, because I wasn't going to let some stupid rule get in the way of this romance.

She started to turn. She was about to leave.

I managed to unclamp my jaw. "No . . . uh, wait." She took a step into the hallway. "Puh . . . leeze!"

She turned back around, puzzled, no doubt expecting a more articulate response from a seasoned lawyer with more than a dozen trials under his belt. Perhaps having second thoughts after hearing the whiny desperation in my voice.

Tap, tap, tap, tap. So there she was. Waiting in the doorway again, now with her arms crossed. Her eyes, on second thought, maybe more glacial blue than cornflower. No smile.

"Yeah. Hmmm. OK." I looked down at my desk calendar and studied the blank page carefully. "Of course. Yes." I nodded my head and tapped my pen some more, as if settling an argument with myself. "I *can* go out tonight. Not a problem. At all."

Slowly, erratically, putty-clogged circuits in my brain began to fire, offering up a few more desperately needed words. I felt another bead of sweat forming, this time on the end of my

nose, as I willed myself to look back up at her. "Just need to run a couple . . . errands-walk-my-dog-go-to-the-bank-pick-up-a-six-pack . . ."

Mercifully, as my coherence and supply of one syllable words waned, she interrupted. "Oh, you have a dog? I love dogs." The smile was back instantly, mischief flashing in her eyes. "We can walk him together."

"Uh."

She walked over to my desk and grabbed a post-it note. "Here's my telephone number." I smelled lilac as she leaned forward and slapped the note back down on my desk. "And my name." She laughed lightly. "Just in case you forgot." When she looked back up at me, the bemused blue eyes and dazzling smile were just inches away.

"Yezzz," I mumbled, trying to read upside down while simultaneously meeting that electric gaze. "I'll call you as soon as I finish my errands . . . uh . . . Ste-PHAN-i."

-Paul Hilding



Pentamorous

--After Louise Glück, "*We look at the world once, in childhood. The rest is memory.*"

A sun shower leaves a raindrop
on every purple phlox petal,
illuminating each one like a drop
of immersion oil, allowing me
to see their shapes appear
as children running with their arms up,
ready to leap into their mothers' arms.

How early knowledge begins this way:
a hand to a flower, a noticing,
the quiet proof that something lives.
Old remedies said the petals soothed
boils and rashes, maybe that, too,
was a kind of looking, a first faith
in what the world could offer.

Five years—the typical life of a perennial—
long enough for a child to learn
foibles and fallibility, to watch
a grandfather settle back into the earth
and never return, like a honeybee
circling the spot where it once
bathed in pollen.

And now, at fifty-seven, I learn
the word pentamorous—five-parted—
and fall in love again
with everything lost and found.

-Joe Geskey

Untitled
Mahsa Jashni

Too late to stop the clock

Mike and I had been searching for the perfect house for six months and were just about ready to give up when the agent said he had one more house for us to look at. He drove us out into the countryside, and we followed him down a long drive flanked by trees. At the end stood a little wooden cottage painted cream with red windowsills and front door. Fantails, thrushes and blackbirds filled the garden with song. Inside, there were three bedrooms, a tiny kitchen and dining area and a wooden beamed ceiling in the living room. I turned to Mike, 'This is it! It's perfect.' He grinned and nodded.

The agent told us the owners had moved to Australia to join family there. The price was a bit cheaper because it had been on the market for a while. 'These days most people want brand new, preferably brick with tiny gardens.'

'Not us!' we chimed.

After we moved in we spent the next three months repainting the inside in quiet neutral colours, ordering new curtains and rugs to cover the wooden floor. Mike mowed the grass and I planted a vegetable garden. One evening we sat on the verandah with a glass of wine, gazing over farmland at the mist-shrouded mountains. We told each other how lucky we were to find the perfect home at last.

'Now we can focus on starting a family,' I said.

Mike frowned. 'What on earth for? All that crying every night? All those dirty nappies? All those tantrums? You saw how worn out my sister was after her first was born. No more, she vowed. The second was a mistake and was even worse than the first. Those two kids are enough to put anybody off.'

'Not all children are like those two,' I argued. 'And your sister is hardly a role model for motherhood.'

'Okay, but we've both got great jobs, and now a lovely home. Why on earth would we want to change the way things are? How about getting a puppy instead?'

I decided to stop arguing and, without telling Mike, I stopped taking the pill. Six months later I still wasn't pregnant.

'You spent far too long focusing on that career of yours,' my mother said. 'I did warn that you were leaving it too late. The clock was already ticking.'

'Thirty-eight is hardly old!' I protested.

'Hmm. Well, now you might have to start thinking about IVF or adoption.' She paused. 'Would Mike agree to that?'

'Probably not,' I said. 'It's the noise kids make that bothers him. The mess and chaos.'

My mother laughed. 'No guarantees you'd get a quiet one with adoption, but it might be worth trying.'

The next day, after I'd sent away for information on adoption, I stood on the verandah with my trowel, ready to do some weeding around the flower beds. I heard the gates open. A red Volvo purred slowly down the drive. It stopped and the engine switched off. A smartly dressed couple got out of the car and walked towards me.

'Forgive the intrusion,' the woman said. 'We're Eliza and Ted Mason. We used to live here and just wanted to come back for another look.'

'Oh, I thought you'd gone to Australia,' I said.

Eliza nodded. 'We did. But it didn't work out. Too much traffic. Crowds. Noise. Snakes and giant spiders!' She shuddered. 'So now we're back in New Zealand. We always loved this house.' She glanced around the garden and took in the newly painted cottage. 'It all looks so beautiful,' she said. 'Do you mind if we look inside?'

After I'd shown them around the inside I offered to make them a cup of tea. They thanked me and sat on the verandah gazing at the mountains.

I handed them their cups and Ted said, 'You know, we really do love this place. We were nuts to leave. Living in an apartment in the city isn't what we want. Would you... er... consider selling this house back to us?'

I was so surprised I couldn't think of a response for a while. 'Er no, I'm sorry,' I said. 'We love it here.'

Ted nodded then rummaged in his pocket. He handed me a card. 'In case you change your mind. Give me a call. Peace and quiet isn't everyone's cup of tea.'

I walked over to their car with them and as they got in I noticed a small black puppy in the back seat. 'Oh how gorgeous!' I said. 'Can I stroke him?'

'Absolutely,' laughed Eliza.

I reached through the open window and ruffled the puppy's head. He gazed at me with huge brown eyes and wagged his tail. 'Oh I love him,' I said. 'We've been thinking about getting a dog. Where did you get this one?'

Eliza smiled. 'We're often asked that. He's so adorable. You'd never guess he's a robot dog, would you?'

I stared at her. 'A what?'

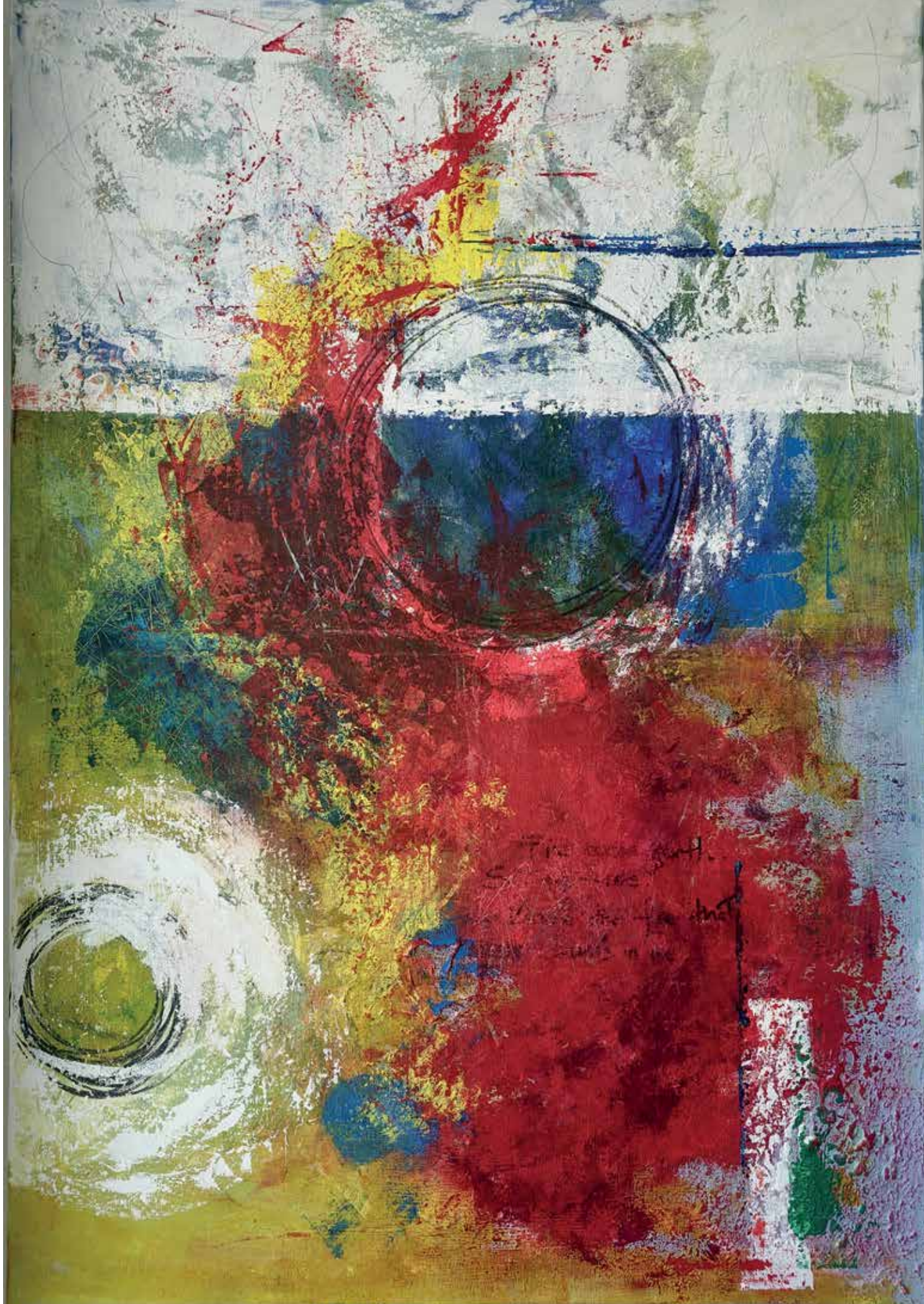
'We're not allowed real dogs in our apartment,' she continued. 'This one is so easy to take care of that we've decided to keep him, even when we move back into the countryside.'

I laughed. 'I had no idea such things existed. It's amazing what technology comes up with, eh? I wonder how long it'll be before they produce robot babies? No crying at night. No dirty nappies. No toddler tantrums. That would suit my husband, ha ha!'

Eliza smiled. 'Well, actually, they already do exist. You really can't tell the difference. We're considering buying one for ourselves.' She handed me another card. 'This is the place. Give them a ring and go and see their stock.'

I watched their car reverse down the drive. I watched Eliza hop out and close the gate. I looked at the card. I looked at the phone number.

-Sandra Arnold



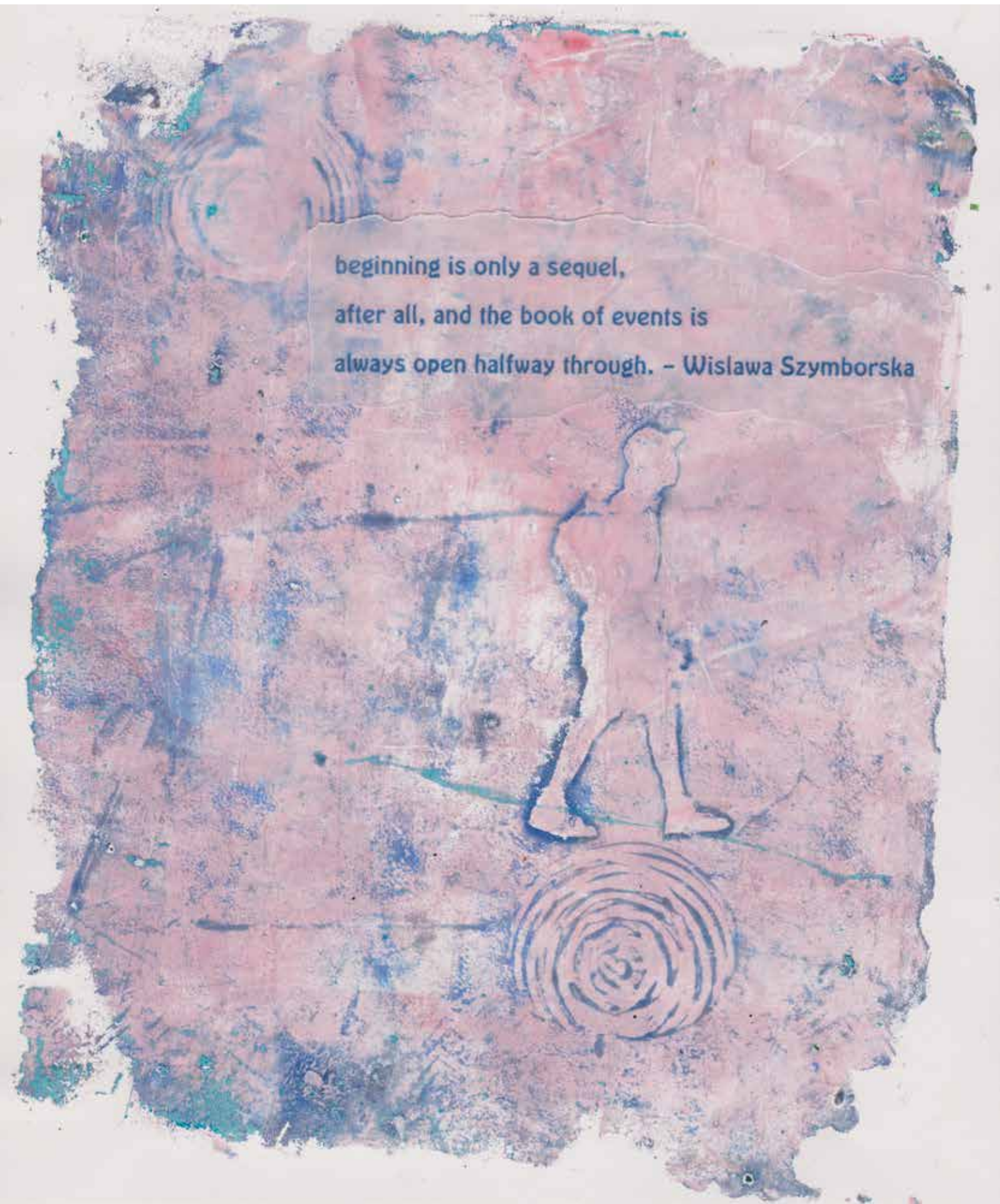
When Silence Was No More
Diana Šarčič

Beginner's Luck

Fishing for mackerel and pollock,
with hand-held lines
in a boat off Coverack
where the blue exhaust
stuttered and phutted against the waves,
my father gutted the mackerel
with a stainless steel knife
and rinsed their innards out
by holding them overboard
and washing their entrails
into the water.

Full strength taking the strain
of the baited line,
my sister Alison said,
'I think I've caught a fish,'
never having felt a bite before.
Fearing a conger eel,
fisherman and my father took over
but what they pulled out with a gaff
was a young nurse shark
with a vicious smirk and an evil eye.
Too dangerous to unhook
and release, it was dumped
under floorboards to thrash and die.

-Duncan Forbes



Contributors

Tyler Alpern is still painting despite a general lack of outside interest in his work. His studio in a log cabin in Colorado where he regularly hosts debauched art-making soirees for the curious locals. He has shared his expertise in the field of art with several generations of university students now.

Duane Anderson currently lives in Olathe, Kansas. He has had poems published in *Fine Lines*, *Cholla Needles*, and several other publications. He is the author of ‘On the Corner of Walk and Don’t Walk,’ ‘Conquer the Mountains,’ ‘Family Portraits,’ ‘The Life of an Ordinary Man,’ and ‘In the Eyes Of.’

Anthem: Dionysus Experiment is a Filipino alternative art collective based in QC who challenges traditional forms. Working from their space, Kublingan ng Sining in Teachers Village East. Following the Cheap Art Manifesto, they turn public streets and parks into immersive stages. Their projects include theater, film, and powerful installations, inviting people to join in raw, living rituals. With bold determination, their work has reached audiences worldwide, from local events to award-winning screenings in India, England, and Vietnam. The group shows that Philippine experimental art can cross borders, serving as both protest and a way to connect people.

Sandra Arnold is an award-winning New Zealand writer with eight published books. Her short fiction has been published internationally and received nominations for the Best Small Fictions, Best Microfictions and The Pushcart Prize. She has a PhD in Creative Writing from Central Queensland University Australia.

Anne Beck has been writing poetry and short stories since childhood. Her poetry has been published in anthologies and journals in Ireland such as *Drawn to the Light*, *Crannog*, *Cyphers*, *Stinging Fly*, *Poetry Ireland Review* etc. She has also been published in British and American magazines such as *Scintilla* and *Superpresent*. She has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize.

Faith-Anne Bell resides in Maryland. She received a BA in Literature from UMBC with minor in American Studies. Faith-Anne started writing poetry at the age of 8. She has recently had her work in Stripes Literary Magazine & Underbelly Press. She has a forthcoming poem in an anthology from South Broadway Press. Following the death of her husband at the age of 41 & her mother within a year’s time, Faith-Anne has rededicated herself to writing. She is currently working on finishing three poetry chapbook manuscripts & can be found reading her poetry at open mics around the Baltimore area.

Valerie Blessley is a ceramic artist living in Vancouver, Canada.

Ghada Ben Hassan is a self-taught artist and doctor whose practice explores metamorphosis, identity, and the boundaries that shape human experience. Drawing since childhood, she has refined her work through observation, experimentation, and curiosity. Her art focuses on the silent language of the body; gestures, gazes, and the unspoken tensions within emotion, reimagined through a dialogue between realism and abstraction. Working primarily with charcoal and watercolor, she balances bold intensity with delicate fluidity. Informed by her dual path in art and medicine, Ghada is deeply interested in the mind–body connection and how emotions, trauma, and memory are encoded within the body. Her work seeks to translate psychological states into tangible forms, capturing the coexistence of vulnerability and strength. Through her practice, she invites viewers to pause, feel, and reflect on their own inner landscape.

Genevieve Betts is the author of the poetry collections *A New Kind of Tongue* (FlowerSong Press, 2023) and *An Unmalled City* (Prolific Press, 2015). Her work has most recently appeared in *Kaleidoscope Magazine*, *Black Lily*, *Dunes Review*, *Unleash Lit*, and in other journals and anthologies. She is an assistant professor at Santa Fe Community College and teaches for Arcadia University’s low-residency MFA program in Glenside, Pennsylvania.

Mark Blickley grew up within walking distance of New York’s Bronx Zoo and is a proud member of the Dramatists Guild, PEN American Center, and Veterans For Responsible Leadership. He is a widely published and produced author, as well as a recipient of a MacArthur Foundation Scholarship Award for Drama. His videos, *Speaking in Bootongue* and *Widow’s Peek: The Kiss of Death*, represented the United States in the year-long international world tour of *Time Is Love: Universal Feelings: Myths & Conjunctions*, organized by esteemed Togolese-French curator, Kisito Assangni. His latest book is the flash fiction collection *Hunger Pains* (Buttonhook Press).

Robert Boucheron is a retired architect in Charlottesville, Virginia. His stories, essays, book reviews, poems, and translations have appeared in *Alabama Literary Review*, *Bellingham Review*, *Fiction International*, and *Saturday Evening Post*.

Ann-Marie Brown is a Canadian painter working in encaustic and oil. She is currently painting out of a studio on the edge of the Salish Sea, in the company of rain & bears.

Nathan Cover is a Chicago-based writer, teacher and traveler who contributes regularly to *BULL magazine*. His flash fiction was named to Wigleaf’s list of Best (Very) Short Fiction of 2024. His work has appeared in *X-ray*, *Hypertext* and *Bloom* magazines, among others.

David Daniel has published 19 stories in journals such as *Bodega*, *Flash Frog*, *Doubly Mad*, *The Headlight Review*, *Vernacular*, *Stone Poetry Quarterly*, *The Dead Mule School of Southern Literature*, *BULL*, and elsewhere. He is quietly at work on a chapbook.

Rosette Dorsa is a retired creative person who loves writing poetry but who also makes collages and paints watercolor prints. In 2024 she had her poem “City Rhythm” published in the April 2024 issue of *Art Ascent Magazine*. The city and people in general, specifically special women in her life have inspired her to continue writing poetry.

Duncan Forbes. British poet published by Faber, Secker and Enitharmon, who produced a Selected Poems (2009), drawn from five previous collections. He has won a Gregory Award, Stephen Spender Prizes, Hawthornden Award and *TLS/Blackwells* prize. For his most recent collections, *Human Time* (2020) and *Under the Sun* (2024), see www.duncanforbes.com

Ilevbaoje Franca also known as Ifpaulart is a self-taught visual artist born on July 1st, 1992, in Lagos, Nigeria. After completing her primary and secondary education in Lagos, she pursued a degree in Food Technology at Rufus Giwa Polytechnic in Ondo State, Nigeria, before returning to Lagos where she currently resides and works. Franca primarily works with oil on canvas, employing brushes to bring her visions to life. She also explores other mediums such as acrylics and mixed media. Her artwork delves into the profound impact of spirituality on human consciousness and the ripple effects of our beliefs on both ourselves and the world around us.

Joseph Geskey lives outside Columbus, Ohio. His second book of poetry, *Vigil*, will be published by Broken Tribe Press. Please visit josephgeskey.com for further information.

Isa Graciano (1974, Brazil). Graduated with a degree in Visual Arts from UNICAMP, Brasil. Since 2021, her research has focused on sculptural language, with an emphasis on the representation of the external female genitalia, the vulva, as an aesthetic and political element. Using molds of real bodies, her works confront the erasure of the vulva in art history and its objectification in the collective imagination. She uses diverse materials with a decolonial and feminist approach. In 2024, she held her first solo exhibition and has since participated in art salons and group exhibitions. @projetoavulva

Erika Guadagnin is an Italian visual artist and curator working across painting, collage, and installation. Her practice explores identity as a fluid and evolving process, shaped by memory, fragmentation, and reconstruction. Through layered surfaces and material experimentation, she creates visual spaces where presence and absence coexist, reflecting an ongoing search for self-definition. Moving between media, her work embraces vulnerability, transformation, and the tension between visibility and concealment. Alongside her artistic practice, she develops curatorial projects that foster dialogue and support experimental contemporary art.

Paul Hilding and his “future” wife are now happily married, living in Idaho. Since retiring, he has had short stories published in magazines such as *After Dinner Conversation*, *Wensum Literary Journal*, *Freedom Fiction Journal*, *Still Point Press* and *Bookends Review*. He is currently working on a rather gloomy “Cli-Fi” novel. Paul’s published stories are collected on his website at www.paulhilding.com

Chad M. Horn is an award winning poet, photographer, and mixed media artist from Central Kentucky; and serves as emcee of Kentucky Writer’s Day.

Ann Howells edited *Illya's Honey* for eighteen years. Recent books include: *So Long As We Speak Their Names* (Kelsay Books, 2019) and *Painting the Pinnwheel Sky* (Assure Press, 2020). Chapbooks include: *Black Crow in Flight*, Editor's Choice –*Main Street Rag*, 2007 and *Softly Beating Wings*, 2017 William D. Barney winner (Blackbead Books). Ann's work appears in many small press and university journals here and abroad. She is a multiple Pushcart nominee.

Rivianna is a pencil artist based out of Brooklyn. They're a graduate of the Sequential Artist Workshop Graphic Novel Intensive. @rivianna

Hou Wei I is a Taiwanese artist and illustrator skilled in various techniques such as painting, sculpture, and embroidery. Her inspiration comes from personal growth and everyday human relationships. Through vibrant colors and an expression filled with positive emotions, she creates works that are both luminous and gentle. Her hope is that viewers can feel, through her art, an energy of hope and personal growth.

Tasnim Ismail holds a PhD in Philosophy, specializing in existentialism, phenomenology and feminist philosophy. Her visual practice extends philosophical inquiry into territory that language alone cannot reach - exploring, through colour and form, how we negotiate the structures and constraints we inherit, and what it means to transform what is given into something we can call our own. Her current series (The Veiled Court) explores how the archetypes of the Major Arcana are experienced as ways of being. Through cinematic tableaux (primarily 11x14"), the archetypes are reimagined as ethereal, feminine figures who inhabit a palace of the psyche. Punctuated by interstitial works and completed by a coda, the 22 paintings trace a journey of self-establishment, crisis, and transformation. Act I is complete - where identity finds its first formation from pure adventure to structured sovereignty - and the full series moves toward completion in 2027.

Mahsa Jashni is an Iranian artist focused on reinterpreting traditional Persian Gol-o-Morgh motifs within contemporary and sustainable contexts. Using recycled materials, wood, fabrics, and synthetic leather, her work creates a connection between traditional beauty, everyday life, and environmental responsibility. Her aim is to preserve and transform tradition into functional and modern forms, and exploring questions of continuity, transformation, and the responsibility of art toward nature and culture.

Courtney Johnson specializes in alternative process and experimental photography and is one of the leading scholars on the photographic cliché-verre technique. Her work has been featured in solo exhibitions in New York, Miami, San Francisco, Richmond, Colombia, and Germany and is in numerous permanent collections including the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; University of Central Florida; Museum of Art Fort Lauderdale; and FOTOMUSEO, Bogotá. Johnson earned her BFA from New York University and her MFA from the University of Miami. She is currently an Associate Professor at the University of North Carolina Wilmington.

Nike Kama is a Berlin-based naive painter known for her distinctive personal technique. Since relocating to Germany in 1999, she has developed an international presence, with works held in private collections across Europe, Asia, and the United States, as well as in Russian museums. Kama has received awards including Golden Time Talent (London) and Dali's Mustache (Spain). Her art has been featured in international publications and used in film productions. She has held solo exhibitions in Berlin, Moscow, and Gatchina, and participated in numerous global exhibitions and art fairs. Her name is also a registered word and figurative mark.

David Koehn is the author of three books of poetry: *Twine*, *Scatterplot*, and *Sur*. His poetry and nonfiction have been published in journals including *Kenyon Review*, *McSweeney's*, *North American Review*, *Lana Turner*, *New England Review*, *The Rumpus*, and *Zyzzyva*. He holds a BA from Carnegie Mellon University and an MFA from the University of Florida, and he teaches at San José State University.

Dr Christina Kolaiti is a visual artist and Senior Lecturer in Photography at York St John University, United Kingdom. Her research specialises in the integration of psychoanalytic theory in the practice of photography, expanding the complex dynamics of photographic portraiture as a form of reflective practice. Christina's current artistic research focuses on early attachment and includes the publications 'Inertia: *identity at state of rest*' and 'The Teddy Bear Cabinet'.

Naomi Klouda is an Alaska writer whose work moves between witness and imagination. She earned a BA in Journalism from Gonzaga University and an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Alaska

Anchorage. Her writings have appeared or are forthcoming in *Amphibian Literary Arts Journal*, *After the Storm*, *Hope in a Grimdark World Anthology*, *365 Tomorrows*, *Foreshadow Magazine*, *Lunchdinner Review*, *Suburban Witchcraft Arts & Literature*, *Cirque Journal*, and *Chapter House*. She is the author of *Anna's Whale*, a novella set in a Sugpiaq village during this time of climate change, when a rare whale beaches on the shore. She also wrote *The Alaska Glacier Dictionary*, a reference guide to Alaska's 700 named glaciers, their vital stats, and histories. She lives in Homer, Alaska.

Gabriel Kolisch is a Brazilian writer living in São Paulo. His short stories have been featured in a few anthologies in his home country. Contact: gkolisch@gmail.com

Jaime Maisuria is a mixed media illustrator.

Aliaksandra Markava has a bachelor's degree in Screen Arts, majoring in Film and Television Direction. She has worked in television and film production and is the author of several documentaries. Now Aliaksandra is a multidisciplinary artist who uses a variety of practices in her work, including drawing, painting, photography, video art, collage, ceramics and sculpture. She is a participant and prize-winner of international exhibitions and biennales with her artworks.

Catherine McGuire is a writer/artist with a deep concern for our planet's future, with five decades of published poetry, six poetry chapbooks, a full-length poetry book, *Elegy for the 21st Century*, a SF novel, *Lifeline* and book of short stories, *The Dream Hunt and Other Tales*. Find her at www.cathymcguire.com

Marina Milito is an actress-dancer, producer, researcher, and art professor at IFAL. She holds a PhD in Architecture and Urbanism (UFAL), a Master's and Bachelor's degree in Performing Arts from Unicamp and a teaching degree in Visual Arts. She is the state coordinator of the Territorial Cultural Agents of Alagoas (Minc). At IFAL, she coordinates research and extension projects in the artistic and cultural field. Since 2006, she has participated in artistic productions as a performer, director, and producer, with presentations throughout Brazil and abroad. And, since 2008, she has worked as a professor.

Tom Misuraca studied writing at Emerson College in his hometown of Boston. Over 160 of his short stories and two novels have been published. His story, *Giving Up The Ghosts*, was published in *Constellations Journal*, and nominated for a Pushcart Prize in 2021. His work has recently appeared in *Exquisite Death*, *The Southern Quill* and *SLAMB! Editors Picks Flavors and Futures for Paris Ass Bookfair, 2025*. He is also a multi-award winning playwright with over 170 short plays and 14 full-lengths produced globally. His musical, *Geeks!*, was produced Off-Broadway in May 2019. He lives in Los Angeles.

Veronika Mol is a Ukrainian artist working with conceptual and instant photography. She is a member of the Mykolaiv Young Photography collective and the Ukrainian Women Photography Organization. In her projects, she explores themes of memory, the body, and transformation, combining analog photography with archival materials and manual intervention.

L.C. Mortimer writes about relationships, military life, parenting, and falling in love. She publishes spooky stories and feel-good romances and everything in between. Her stories have appeared in multiple anthologies and magazines, including *Swords in the Shadows*. Most recently, she has published the *Stay Dead* series, which follows a group of survivors during the zombie apocalypse and the mental health challenges they face along the way.

Dr. Sonali Narang is a writer and researcher working at the intersection of social sciences, climate, and human experience. Her creative work often explores themes of healing, displacement, memory, and quiet transformation, with a focus on emotional truth and understated beginnings. She is interested in how personal narratives intersect with larger social and environmental changes. Her poetry leans toward minimalism, reflection, and human vulnerability, allowing space for silence as much as language.

Kaia Otstak is a painter, illustrator, performance artist, and a Master of Philosophy. She holds a B.A. and M.A. in Philosophy from Tallinn University. Otstak has had solo exhibitions (2025 in Pärnu, 2022 in Rapla, etc.) and has participated in group exhibitions, performed at international events (2015 in Helsinki, Vilnius), her articles and illustrations have been published in different special magazines, newspapers, and books. Otstak is interested in expressing philosophical questions and mysticism. She portrays nature and the seasons symbolically and figuratively. She currently lives and works in Estonia.

Kristy Peet is a large format analog photographer focusing primarily on staged images conceptually related to the internal personal state. Her work has been shown in solo and group exhibitions across the US including a solo exhibition at the Dallas Contemporary and is in the collections of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston and Savannah College of Art and Design. Kristy also served seven years as Vice President of BOX13 Artspace, an artist-run exhibition and studio space devoted to the creation and advancement of experimental contemporary art in Houston. Kristy lives and works in Houston, Texas.

Michael Penncavage's story, *The Cost of Doing Business*, originally appeared in *Thuglit*, won the Derringer Award for best mystery. One of his stories, *The Converts* was filmed as a short movie, while another, *The Landlord* was adapted into a play. His debut novella, *Person Unknown*, adapted from the screenplay, was also recently released from All Due Respect Press. He can be reached at mpenncavage@hotmail.com or at www.michaelpenncavage.com

Dr. Helge H. Paulsen studied social sciences at the University of Hanover, focus: culture/sociology of art. Degree: Doctor of Philosophy (2013) Dissertation: David Wojnarowicz and the positioning of postmodernism - an art sociological and philosophical development of the concept of U.S. postmodernism based on the artist David Wojnarowicz. 2010 - present freelance journalist, curator and art photographer www.artpromoter.com Photographic works published in international art magazines. Participated in art fairs as well as exhibitions in various national galleries. Member of the Museum of Photography in Braunschweig.

Lisa Perkins' poetry has been featured by *The Mum Poem Press*, *the6ress*, *Poetry's Dead anthology*, *Free Verse Revolution*, *An Aitiuil anthology* and others. She came second in South Dublin libraries poetry competition 2022 and was nominated for the Pushcart Prize for her poem 'Thrifting'. Lisa lives in Dublin, a mammy of three who inspire her love of capturing the everyday. Instagram: @lisaperks

Nemanja Popadić is an artist based in Vienna. He holds a BA in Design/Fashion Design from IUAV University of Venice and an MA in Art and Science from the University of Applied Arts Vienna, where he is pursuing a doctoral degree. Working across performance, multimedia, and hybrid formats, his practice embraces fluidity and plurality, resisting fixed definitions. Rather than anchoring work to specific contexts, he creates atmospheres that explore universal questions of human existence. His work has been shown in galleries and museums across Austria, Italy, France, and Serbia.

Jennifer Pratt-Walter, she/her, is a Crone, poet, musician and photographer. She loves to focus on the small or mundane miracles that are easily overlooked. Her work has been featured in many print and on-line journals including *Calyx*, *Palette* and *Locust Shells*. Jennifer has three grown children and husband, and lives on a small farm in Washington.

Diana Raab, MFA, PhD, is a memoirist, poet, workshop leader, thought-leader and award-winning author of 13 books and editor of three anthologies. Her work has been widely published and anthologized. Her poems have been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and The Best of the Net. Raab writes for *Psychology Today*, *The Good Men Project*, *Sixty and Me*, *Medium*, and is a guest writer for many others. Visit: <https://www.dianaraab.com>.

Erin Redfern's work has recently appeared in *The Shore*, *Rattle*, *The Hopkins Review*, *New Ohio Review*, and *The Massachusetts Review*. She earned her PhD at Northwestern University, where she was a Fellow at the Searle Center for Teaching Excellence. She has served as poetry judge for the San Francisco Unified School District's Arts Festival and as a reader for *DMQ Review*. erinredfern.org

Marcella Remund is a Pushcart nominee whose poems have appeared in *Poetry Ireland Review*, *Pasque Petals*, *Banyan Review*, *Sheila-Na-Gig*, *Quartet* and other journals and anthologies. She is the author of four poetry books, *The Sea is My Ugly Twin* (2018), *The Book of Crooked Prayer* (2020), *Hysterian* (2025), and *Stroke, Stroke* (forthcoming in 2026), all from Finishing Line Press. She and her husband live with dogs, canaries, and a chatty grey parrot on the river bluffs of South Dakota. You can find more about Marcella at www.marcellaremund.com.

Meggie Royer (she/her) is a Midwestern writer and was previously the Founder and Editor-in-Chief of *Persephone's Daughters*, a journal for abuse survivors. She has won numerous awards and has been nominated several times for the Pushcart Prize. She thinks there is nothing better in this world than a finished poem.

Diana Šare is a visual artist working with abstract, process-based painting as a way of listening to what forms before language. Her practice unfolds through layering, erasure, gesture, and pause, allowing images

to surface gradually rather than arrive fully formed. Painting becomes a site of emergence - where silence, trace, and attention shape meaning. The process often continues in writing, as short reflective texts accompany completed works, extending the inquiry beyond the canvas.

Genevieve Sarnak is a librarian based in Western, Massachusetts. Her poetry's been curated by *PHIL LIT Journal* and is forthcoming in *Scapegoat Review*. She's hard at work on a young adult dystopian novel.

Amy Shore is the pen name for a piano teacher, novelist, poet, community columnist, and children's theater playwright and producer. She is published in Stanislaus Magazine, Lifestyle Magazine, and on her Substack site: amyshoreauthor.substack.com. *Never Say Uncle*, her debut novel, available on Amazon and at Barnes & Noble is a romantic suspense cozy. She lives in California.

Valentin Sismann develops a practice that combines acousmatic composition and video. He explores the idea of expanded music, where sound and visuals are expressed in ways that are either poetic, narrative, or conceptual. His works focus on our relationship with technology, particularly recording media, which he questions and manipulates within critical or imaginary spaces.

Vlada Teaca is a 23-year-old conceptual portrait photographer based in Berlin. Originally from Moldova, she left home at 19 to move across different European cities, exploring photography and developing her artistic voice. Currently based in Berlin, she specializes in conceptual portrait photography that examines the boundaries between reality and dreams.

Colette Tennant has three books of poetry: *Commotion of Wings*, *Eden and After*, and *Sweet Gothic*. Her book, *Religion in The Handmaid's Tale: a Brief Guide*, was published in 2019 to coincide with Atwood's publication of *The Testaments*. Her poems have won various awards and have been nominated for Pushcart Prizes along with being published in various journals, including *Prairie Schooner*, *Rattle*, *Southern Poetry Review*, and *Poetry Ireland Review*. Colette is an English and Humanities Professor who has also taught art in Great Britain, Germany, and Italy.

Cliff Tisdell attended the School of Visual Arts and the Arts Student's League. His work draws on various genres of painting, sculpture, cinema, literature, and illustration, and is in private collections in the United States, Europe, and Canada. Venues include the Edward Hopper House Museum, Carnegie Hall, Eric Fischl's America Here and Now Project, the Chautauqua Institution, Ivan Karp's OK Harris Gallery, and the Village Voice. His paintings have appeared in several literary journals, including: *Blackbird*, *Curlew New York*, and *Hayden's Ferry*. Mr Tisdell has been delivering talks on the arts to libraries and arts organizations since 2017.

Elena Tretyachenko is a Russian writer currently living in Vietnam. Her work explores themes of exile, displacement, and emotional connection in the modern world. She is currently working on a fantasy novel titled *Tower Girl*.

Aleksandra Vujisić (Podgorica, Montenegro) is an English language professor and an award-winning writer and poet. She writes in her native language and English, and her work has been translated into Italian, Spanish, Polish, Albanian, Korean and Chinese language. She is an author of six books.

Zhe Yang graduated from the Ornamental Sculpture program at the Beijing Institute of Fashion Technology, with a Bachelor's degree in Literature. During his undergraduate studies, he took courses in sculpture fundamentals, metalworking, wood carving, ceramics, and other sculpture-related subjects. Creative Philosophy: Rooted in the most fundamental reflections, he explores the evolution of self-awareness and express the most authentic inner emotions through light-hearted artistic techniques.

Anna Zhukova graduated from the Faculty of Cinema and Television of Kyiv National University of Culture and Arts in 2003. From 2003 to 2013 she worked as a television producer. 2018-2020 she studied photography at the Kyiv School of Photography, the Vadym Doctorov School of Photography. In 2022 she started MYPH School of Arts, attended a course of lectures on conceptual photography by Roman Pyatkovka. She is a member of the MYPH community.



