



# Aii

m a g a z i n e

issue 11. fall 2019.

## **THE ZOMBIE ISSUE**

FEATURING

Baileigh Higgins

Juan J. Morales

Lauren Wilson

Osama El-Olaithey

## Editor in Chief

Erin O'Neill Armendarez  
Carlsbad, New Mexico

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Lisa Redfield  
Denver, Colorado

Erin Schalk  
Los Angeles area, California

## Art / Publication Design

Katie Redfield  
Denver, Colorado

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[www.ajimagazine.com](http://www.ajimagazine.com)  
[support@ajimagazine.com](mailto:support@ajimagazine.com)

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# Artists & Authors

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## Adkins, Paul David

Paul David Adkins lives in New York. In 2018, Lit Riot published his collection *Dispatches from the FOB*. Journal publications include *Pleiades*, *River Styx*, *Rattle*, *Diode*, *Baltimore Review*, *Crab Creek*, and *Whiskey Island*. He has received five Pushcart nominations and two finalist nominations from the CNY Book Awards.



## Belén López, Ana

Ana Belén López was born in Sinaloa State, Mexico. Her writing often touches on ecological subjects, and on nature affecting human life and vice versa. Her sparse use of language creates a luminous and misty world, reflected in the title of the unpublished collection that most of these poems come from, *Ni visible, ni palpable* [Neither Visible Nor Palpable]. Her published books of poetry include *Alejándose avanza*, *Del barandal*, *Silencios*, and *Retrato hablado*.



Ana Belén López has been a professor of literature for more than two decades, teaching courses in twentieth-century Latin American fiction and poetry. She was part of the Professional School of Dance of Mazatlán, participating in collaborations involving dance and poetry with students and with the modern dance company Delfos. *Translated from the Spanish by Eugeno Polisky and Zack Rogow.*

**Eugenio Polisky** authored the poetry collections *silencio en la nada luz* [English version: *silence in nothingness light*]; *Quimera Bulevar* [English version: *Pipe-Dream Boulevard*]; and *desde el fondo* [from the depths]. He has translated poetry by Irene Gruss, Liliana Díaz Mindurry, Daniel Freidemberg, and Hugo Mujica into English, as well as poetry by Anne Carson and Dan Bellm into Spanish.

**Zack Rogow** was a co-winner of the PEN/Book-of-the-Month Club Translation Award for *Earthlight* by André Breton, and winner of a Bay Area Book Reviewers Award (BABRA) for his translation of George Sand's novel, *Horace*.

## Campiglio, Stephen

Stephen Campiglio's poems and translations have recently appeared in *Aji*, *City Works Journal*, *Journal of Italian Translation*, *Miramar*, *TAB: The Journal of Poetry & Poetics*, and *Tipton Poetry Journal*. Winner of the Willis Barnstone Translation Prize for his translation of a poem by Italian writer Giuseppe Bonaviri (1924-2009), he has now completed a book-length manuscript of translations of the author, *The Ringing Bones: Selected Poems of Giuseppe Bonaviri*. Nominated for two Pushcart Prizes, Campiglio has published two chapbooks, *Cross-Fluence* (2012) and *Verbal Clouds through Various Magritte Skies* (2014).



*photo by Roger Gordy*

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## Camps, Martín

Martín Camps is a contemporary poet born in Tijuana, Mexico, one associated with the literature of the North, or Desert. He is the author of five collections of poetry, as well as essay collections covering the themes of border-region literature and contemporary Mexican letters. *Translated from the Spanish by Anthony Seidman.*



*photo by Alejandro Meter*

### Anthony Seidman

Anthony Seidman is a poet and translator from Los Angeles. His most recent books are *Smooth Talking Dog: Poems of Roberto Castillo Udiarte* (Phoneme, 2016) and *A Stab in the Dark: Poems of Facundo Bernal* (LARB Classics, 2019).

## Charlot, Vanessa

Vanessa Charlot, a Miami native, is a self-taught documentary photographer that began her art career while exploring the rural parts of Haiti. She began documenting everyday lives in rural Haiti and amassed an impressive body of work that explores spirituality, socio-economic issues, and sexual intersectionality. Experiencing life in developing countries became the catalyst through which Vanessa actively documents marginalized people's experiences throughout the world. As a documentary photographer, she seeks to capture the raw beauty of black and brown people as they balance their lives on the fine line of resilience and struggle.



## Christensen, Natalie

Natalie Christensen is a photographer based in Santa Fe, New Mexico and has shown work in the U.S. and internationally including London, Dusseldorf, New York and Los Angeles. She was one of five invited photographers for the exhibition *The National 2018: Best of Contemporary Photography* at the Fort Wayne Museum of Art and has recently been named one of "Ten Photographers to Watch" by the Los Angeles Center of Digital Art. Her photographs are in the permanent collections of the Fort Wayne Museum of Art and the University of Texas at Tyler. In addition to pursuing her interests in art and design, Natalie has worked as a psychotherapist for over 25 years and has been particularly influenced by the work of depth psychologist Carl Jung. This influence is evidenced in her photographs, as shadows and psychological metaphors are favored subjects. Natalie is represented by Turner Carroll Gallery in Santa Fe, New Mexico and Susan Spiritus Gallery in Newport Beach, California.



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## Daley, Tom

Recipient of the Dana Award in Poetry, Tom Daley's poetry has appeared in *Aji*, *Harvard Review*, *Massachusetts Review*, *Fence*, *Denver Quarterly*, *Crazyhorse*, *Witness*, and elsewhere. FutureCycle Press published his first-full length collection of poetry, *House You Cannot Reach—Poems in the Voice of My Mother and Other Poems*, in 2015.



## Dowd, Juditha

Juditha Dowd has contributed work to *Poet Lore*, *Poetry Daily*, *Spillway*, *Rock & Sling*, *Cider Press Review* and elsewhere. She is the author of *Mango in Winter*, a full-length collection, as well as 3 chapbooks. Her verse biography, *Audubon's Sparrow*, is forthcoming from Rose Metal Press. Learn more about her and her work at [www.judithadowd.org](http://www.judithadowd.org)



## El Laithy, Osama

Osama El-Laithy (full name Osama Imam El-Laithy Imam) has been employed at the Egyptian Ministry of Education as a high school art teacher, and most recently as a supervisor. He has exhibited his art individually and in various collections at the Ahmed Shawki Museum (Cairo, 2001), Cairo Atelier (2007), American House of Art and Design (2011), Saad Zaghloul Museum (2011), Cairo Metro (2011), and in an international exhibition at Cairo Atelier in 2012. His art has been reviewed in Egyptian and Arab newspapers. He is a member of the Egyptian National Committee of the International Association of Art UNESCO. You may learn more about him and his art at <http://www.osamaimam.blogspot.com/>



## Gallo, Louis

Two full volumes of Louis Gallo's poetry, *Crash* and *Clearing the Attic*, will be published by Adelaide in the near future. A third, *Archaeology*, will be published by Kelsay Books. His work has appeared or will shortly appear in *Wide Awake in the Pelican State* (LSU anthology), *Southern Literary Review*, *Fiction Fix*, *Glimmer Train*, *Hollins Critic*, *Rattle*, *Southern Quarterly*, *Litro*, *New Orleans Review*, *Xavier Review*, *Glass: A Journal of Poetry*, *Missouri Review*, *Mississippi Review*, *Texas Review*, *Baltimore Review*, *Pennsylvania Literary Journal*, *The Ledge*, *storySouth*, *Houston Literary Review*, *Tampa Review*, *Raving Dove*, *The Journal* (Ohio), *Greensboro Review*, and many others.



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## Garmon, John

John Garmon is a writing assistant at the College of Southern Nevada in Las Vegas. His poems have been in *Commonweal*, *Aji*, *Radius*, *Ploughshares*, *Passages North*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Southern Poetry Review*, *Southern Humanities Review*, *The Oregonian*, and many other periodicals and literary magazines.



## Gregory, Dave

Dave Gregory lives in Canada, a country he shares with an abundance of migratory waterfowl. He is an Associate Editor with *Exposition Review* and a Fiction Reader for journals on both sides of the Atlantic. His work has appeared in more than twenty-five literary publications including *The Nashwaak Review*, *The Lindenwood Review* and *Typehouse Literary Magazine*.



## Hostovksy, Paul

Paul Hostovksy is the author of ten books of poetry, most recently, *Late for the Gratitude Meeting* (Kelsay Books, 2019). His poems have won a Pushcart Prize, two Best of the Net awards, and have been featured on *Poetry Daily*, *Verse Daily*, and *The Writer's Almanac*. Visit his website at [www.paulhostovksy.com](http://www.paulhostovksy.com)



## Inman, Clinton

Clinton Inman is a retired school teacher, Renaissance painter, poet, and piano player, born in England, graduated from South Dakota State University in 1977.



## Johnson, K. Carlton

Carlton's work has appeared in *Rattle*, *MacGuffin*, *The Diner* and *Barely South*. Both poet and visual artist, she lives on the shores of Lake Superior.



## Johnson, Susan

Susan Johnson's poems have recently appeared in *North American Review*, *San Pedro River Review*, *SLAB*, and *3 Nations Anthology*. She teaches writing at UMass Amherst.



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## Kolbet, Matt

Matt Kolbet teaches and writes in Oregon.



## Lawry, Mercedes

Mercedes Lawry has published poetry in such journals as *Poetry*, *Nimrod*, and *Prairie Schooner*. She's published three chapbooks, the latest, *In The Early Garden With Reason*, was selected by Molly Peacock for the 2018 WaterSedge Chapbook Contest. Her full manuscript *Small Measures* is forthcoming from Twelve Winters Press. She's also published short fiction and stories and poems for children.



## Lipson, Joshua

Josh Lipson is a student of history, language, and the mind based in Virginia by way of Boston, Jerusalem, Istanbul, and San Francisco. His work has been featured in *Obra/Artifact*, *Homonym Journal*, *Briars Lit*, *Burning House Press*, *Revue Post*, and *Petrichor*.



## Machan, Katharyn Howd

Since 1977, Katharyn Howd Machan, picking up where Rod Serling left off, has taught creative writing overlooking Cayuga Lake. Currently, as a full professor at Ithaca College, she emphasizes fairy tales for her students. Her poems have appeared in 38 published collections and many magazines, anthologies, and textbooks. *What the Piper Promised* won the 2018 Alexandria Quarterly Press Chapbook Competition.



## Mangani, Marisa

Marisa Mangani is a former chef, and now designs commercial kitchens and bars. In her free time, she is the Sarasota host of Tampa Bay's Wordier than Thou, an open mic storytelling forum. Her essays and fiction have been published in *Hippocampus*, *Skirt!*, *Borrowed Solace*, *South 85 Journal*, *Sleet Magazine*, *Punchnels*, *Sandhill Review* and *Entropy Magazine*. Her work has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize and *Sundress Best of the Net Anthology*.



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## Miller, Andrew

Andrew Miller is a poet, critic and translator with over eighty publications to his name. His poems have appeared in such journals as *The Massachusetts Review*, *Ekphrasis*, *Iron Horse*, *Shenandoah*, *Spoon River Review*, *Laurel Review*, *Hunger Mountain*, *Rattle*, and *New Orleans Review*. In addition, Miller's poems have appeared in such anthologies as *How Much Earth*, *Anthology of Fresno Poets* (2001) and *The Way We Work: Contemporary Literature from the Workplace* (2008). Finally, he is co-editor of *The Gazer Within*, *The Selected Prose of Larry Levis* (2001) and the author of *Poetry, Photography Ekphrasis: Lyrical Representations of Photography from the 19th Century to the Present* (2015).



## Ramos, Yusnavy

Yusnavy Ramos was born in Havana, Cuba. She is an MFA candidate at Colorado State University, where she teaches composition and works as an editorial assistant at the *Colorado Review*. She lives for sunshine, late mornings, and dark coffee.



## Riecki, Ron

Ron Riecki wrote *U.P.*, a novel, *Posttraumatic: A Memoir*, and edited *Undocumented*, *The Many Lives of The Evil Dead*, *Here: Women Writing on Michigan's Upper Peninsula*, and *The Way North*. He has books upcoming with Main Street Rag, Loyola University Maryland's Apprentice House Press, McFarland, and Wayne State University Press.



## Sam, David Anthony

David Anthony lives in Virginia with his wife and life partner, Linda. Sam's poetry has appeared in over 90 publications and his poem, "First and Last," won the 2018 Rebecca Lard Award. His five published collections include *Final Inventory* (Prolific Press 2018) and *Finite to Fail: Poems after Dickinson*, the 2016 Grand Prize winner of the GFT Press Chapbook Contest.



## Santer, Rikki

Rikki Santer's work has appeared in various publications including *Ms. Magazine*, *Poetry East*, *Margie*, *Hotel Amerika*, *The American Journal of Poetry*, *Slab*, *Crab Orchard Review*, *RHINO*, *Grimm*, *Slipstream*, *Midwest Review* and *The Main Street Rag*. Her seventh poetry collection, *In Pearl Broth*, was just published by Stubborn Mule Press.



# Artists & Authors

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## Scacco, Peter

Peter L. Scacco began making woodcut prints when he was sixteen years old. His artwork has been featured in numerous print and online magazines and journals. Scacco is also the author of six books of poetry and a translation of Théophile Gautier's *The Salon of 1850-51*. A native of Cleveland, Ohio, and a graduate of Fordham University with a degree in art history, Mr. Scacco has lived and worked in New York, Paris, Tokyo, Brussels, and cities throughout the USA. Since 1995 he has made his home in Austin, Texas. Further examples of his art can be seen at [www.scaccowoodcuts.com](http://www.scaccowoodcuts.com).



## Shelley, Jacalyn

Jacalyn Shelley has been published in several journals including *Sugar House Review*, *Dunes Review*, *DASH*, *San Pedro River Review*, *Barely South*, *Shot Glass Journal*, and *Pilgrimage Magazine's* injustice and protest issue. In 2018, she was nominated for a Pushcart Prize. As a member of the South Jersey Poets Collective, Jackie participates in poetry readings in Atlantic City and hosts the Leap Street Poets Workshop. To enjoy more of her poetry go to <https://www.JacalynShelley.com>



## St. Clare, Vincent

Vincent St. Clare is the nom de plume of a fledgling writer from Connecticut. He is the chief editor of *The Drunken Llama* {[thedrunkenllama.com](http://thedrunkenllama.com)}, a web-based creative outlet. He is a student of philosophy, comparative religion, and life.



## Stanek, Claudia M.

Claudia M. Stanek's work has been turned into a libretto, been part of an art exhibition, and been translated into Polish. Her chapbook, *Language You Refuse to Learn*, was published by Bright Hill Press (2014). Her poems may be found online and in print. She holds an MFA from Bennington College.



## Vargas, Colby

Colby Vargas is a part-time author and full-time educator. He lives in the Chicago area with his wife and daughter. His work has been published in *Annalemma*, *Bartleby Snopes*, and *the Louisville Review*.

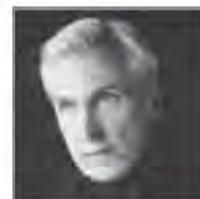


# Artists & Authors

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## Vyse, Richard

Internationally collected artist Richard Vyse has recently shown at the Prince Street Project Space in SoHo, NYC, a Leslie Lohman Museum Gallery, and has shown in Manhattan and Honolulu galleries as well. He has studied at the School of Visual Arts in Manhattan and taught at Pratt in Brooklyn. His art has been featured in many international art magazines. For bail and published art, go to <http://manartbyvyse.blogspot.com>



## Whitman-Bradley, Buff

Buff Whitman-Bradley's poems have appeared in many print and online journals. His latest collection is *Crows with Bad Writing*. His interviews with soldiers refusing to fight in Iraq and Afghanistan were the basis for the oral history book *About Face: Military Resisters Turn Against War*. He lives with his wife Cynthia in northern California. His podcast of poems about aging, memory, and mortality can be heard at [www.thirdactpoems.podbean.com](http://www.thirdactpoems.podbean.com)



## Wilson, Reed

Reed's poems have appeared in *The Antioch Review*, *The Chattahoochee Review*, *The Cortland Review*, *Aquifer: The Florida Review Online* and elsewhere. His book-length manuscript *Orpheum* (which includes poems in this issue) has been a finalist for both the Marsh Hawk Press and Trio House Press Poetry Prizes. Reed has had book reviews published in *Poetry International*, *The Chattahoochee Review*, and *The Summerset Review*. He lives in Los Angeles, and teaches at UCLA.



## Wolak, Bill

Bill Wolak has just published his fifteenth book of poetry entitled *The Nakedness Defense* with Ekstasis Editions. His collages have appeared recently in Naked in New Hope 2018, The 2019 Seattle Erotic Art Festival, Poetic Illusion, The Riverside Gallery, Hackensack, NJ, the 2019 Dirty Show in Detroit, 2018, The Rochester Erotic Arts Festival, and The 2018 Montreal Erotic Art Festival.



# Editor's Welcome

*Most zombie stories, the problems they solve are not the actual zombies. The problems they solve are the human interactions.*

-Stephen Graham Jones

At a cocktail party some years ago, I was chatting idly with a colleague from Cameroon, a placid woman with a calm gaze. Halfway through her second drink, she assured me that zombies are real. There is a drug, she explained, that can be given to an unsuspecting victim that will turn him or her into a corpse-like creature than can then be buried, resurrected soon after, and, with the help of yet another drug, kept in a continued state of disorientation and confusion, for all practical purposes, a zombie. Early the next day, my colleague emailed imploring that I not share the story with anyone at work. A PhD in biology, she didn't want co-workers getting the wrong idea about her.

But I never forgot her story. Years later, at a UFO conference in Roswell, New Mexico, (yes, those are a thing), I stumbled across a book in the exhibit hall that gave explicit instructions on how to make a zombie out of a previously healthy person. The required pharmaceutical substance was specifically named although if I'm remembering correctly, it was not all that easy to procure. Apparently, the alien and the living dead are close relatives. According to Live Science, there is in fact a "coupe poudre" with a substance that comes from pufferfish, among other things, and well, Haiti has explicit laws against its use. For you doubters, the subject has even been covered in the esteemed medical publication *Lancet*.

From whence comes the temptation to strip the humanity dignity of another?

It's a question worth serious contemplation, thus the somewhat odd theme for the fall 2019 issue of *Aji*. I felt confident the writers and artists who read our call would understand that we weren't necessarily looking for skull-crushing, stumbling armies of dripping corpses although we were glad to consider works portraying them. True to our hope, many submitted work on the zombie metaphor that disturbs, horrifies, or pokes fun, offering readers fresh, new twists on the classic theme.

It seems all too easy to otherize those whose beliefs, actions, and words frighten or repel us. I've been invited to attend workshops with titles like "How to Deal with Toxic People." I sense the metaphor. There's the workshop facilitator and the hapless victims of the toxic,

# Editor's Welcome

and then those others we must fight (if not expel or outright destroy) before they infect our workspaces and public domains with their evil venom. Apparently, we fear one another, and we fight the impulse to allow our fear to overcome our empathy and our ability to reason.

There is in the human psyche the realm of the zombie, the numb, the apathetic, the drive to consume the lives of the innocent in a nightmarish attempt to establish an inhuman, abnormal way of being. In this issue, the struggle for peace and domestic tranquility is often a struggle of heart, mind, and spirit, often a sole undertaking, where the mutant is actually one face of the fragmented self, torn between fear, hatred, and the desire for authentic community. I hope you thoroughly enjoy all the unique zombies very much alive roaming these pages, hoping to borrow your brain for just an hour or two. They'll give it back after. Really.

A heartfelt, sincere thanks to all who made this issue possible. If the living dead ever do unexpectedly emerge as an actual threat, I want you all on my team! We'll find ourselves a Starbucks, and hope for the best.



  
Erin O'Neill Armendarez  
Editor in Chief



# IN THE STUDIO

an interview with Osama El-Laithy

**Aji Magazine (AM): Can you tell us a little bit about yourself and where you are from?**

**Osama El-Laithy (OE):** My full name is Osama imam el Laithy imam Afify, and I am from Egypt. I grew up in the small village of Abu Zaabal in Kalubia. Among the villagers, I learned about Egypt's traditions and cultural inheritance. As an artist, I am constantly trying to change and grow whenever possible. Art lives in an artist's blood and can never leave it. Our souls are restless, never quite comfortable. I love my art; I consider it my life, and when someone asks me why I draw, I tell them I draw to feel I am a free man. There are many things in my life I didn't choose. But my art, I alone choose to do that.

**AM: Can you describe your work as supervisor in the ministry of education?**

**OE:** My work as a supervisor is to track the teachers of art education and also to discover artistic talent. I prepare lessons and workshops to improve the efficiency of the teachers, and every month, I help them to

prepare for annual exhibitions at the county level in less than ideal situations, with only basic materials and very limited physical facilities.

**AM: How much of your time to do you devote to painting?**

**OE:** I practice art almost daily, not for a specified number of hours, but often for four hours or even more, when I forget about everything else and continue drawing until dawn the next day.

**AM: When did you start making art?**

**OE:** I started drawing at four years of age. At that time, I filled the streets with drawings of birds, animal, people, and trees. Friends of the street, my brothers and my mother saw my drawing and liked them, which encouraged me so much to continue drawing and to be proud of myself.

During elementary school, I used to draw celebrities, singers and actors. Everyone knew me as an artist and encouraged me at the time. Then I moved to prep school and became well-known through my many drawings of celebrities. After that, I moved to secondary school. There I also received much good encouragement from teachers because I used to draw all the teachers, too. The art teacher advised me to apply for the art capabilities test so I would have the chance to enter the fine arts college at the university, so I did, and I passed the test and enrolled in courses at that college.

As a matter of fact, my family opposed that, thinking that fine arts had no future, but I held to my wish. College study was for five years. At the time, I was well-known for watercolor and other paintings to resemble photographs. I graduated from the fine arts college in 1996.

**AM: Can you tell us a little bit about how you choose your subjects?**

**OE:** I choose the subjects that dazzle me. I am impressed by the beautiful things or the environment around me.

I don't forget that I must clarify light and shadow to reveal the sublime element I love so much.

**AM: Once you've chosen a subject, how do you start the painting?**

**OE:** I usually think about formatting elements, colors and a simple geometric perspective until the construction is complete. Each time I draw and change the element and color and start planning with a pencil and then all the color as a first stage and closer to the work of my soul. Then, I move away and re- approach in this same way.



*A Mother's Love*

**AM: Do you paint from life, photographs, drawings, or a combination?**

**OE:** Yes, I paint from life and also from photographs, and also from the imagination. There are examples among the images I have sent to you.

**AM: How long do you spend creating each piece?**

**OE:** It varies from one painting to another; some pieces keep me working for a year, and another week, and another. I can not say when I am finished. This is not for business; business puts limits on time.

**AM: What motivates you to continue making new work?**

**OE:** This is a really difficult question. I want to say, art within me. I really can't describe that as well as I'd like. I love beauty. I love being happy, and art is what makes me a happy person. My colleagues encourage what I do and show their admiration with every new thing I do. I have about 80 works of art or more, and I hope to produce many more. I hope someday my success will increase because I work hard and strive. I feel that God created me with this talent for some purpose, not just for a hobby. I want to publish art all over the world, but I'm not sure how to make that happen yet.

**AM: What do you find most challenging about creating a painting?**

**OE:** One of the things I find most difficult is choosing the "hero" of the painting and distributing the elements. I also find it challenging to communicate the ideas I hope to deliver to viewers from the psychological perspective with available raw materials. It can be difficult to choose a suitable size for a painting—so many have failed because of bad selection when it comes to size.



*Waiting for Someone*



*Still Waters*

# I want to give people hope, to touch them.

**-Osama El-Laithy**

**AM: How do you usually share your work with others?**

**OE:** I share my work by posting it on Facebook or Twitter only. This is because of a lack of material possibilities.

**AM: What do you hope viewers will experience when looking at one of your finished pieces?**

**OE:** I want them to see the feelings that my artwork contains, emotions of sadness, happiness, joy and hope. I want to give people hope, to touch them. Also, I do not hide the extent of my workmanship.

**AM: Who are some artists that inspire you?**

**OE:** I love Vincent Van Gogh, the Dutch artist, and also Rembrandt. There are artists from Egypt, Mahmoud Mokhtar, a famous Egyptian artist, for example.

**AM: What is the role of art in contemporary Egyptian culture?**

**OE:** It is a means of recreation, entertainment, and relief from the stress of work, finding instead streams of positive emotional involvement. It is a tool for raising feeling. As an educational tool, art expresses the same national pride as speeches and the national anthem. Art is also used in religion to reflect core beliefs and religious values, and it enhances religious events. Art enters a community or nation's social life and enters into its details.



*Girl with Goldfish*



*Girl with Ducks*





*Boy in His Bath*



*Children at the Beach*

**AM: What are the benefits and challenges of being an artist in contemporary Egypt?**

**OE:** I am hoping to achieve excellence, to promote my art and to enjoy fame. But the challenges are very difficult. It is difficult to convince people of the importance of art in life in Egypt, very difficult. Unfortunately, there is some confusion here as to which artists have actual talents. Some weaker artists are said to have more talent while stronger artists are said to have less talent. Unfortunately, every real artist finds himself looking to travel. From the outside world, He can receive the necessary appreciation for his life as an artist, where art overshadows everything else.

**AM: What do you hope to accomplish next?**

**OE:** I want to spread my art out into the world. I am not an artist who makes art only for money. I want to create a different kind of art, art that has a new vision that isn't limited solely by the academic art taught by the technical college.



*Osama El-Laithey in his studio*

# For As Long As We Both Are Human: The Promise of Zombies in Fiction, Poetry, and Food

by Melissa Gish

We all know our zombie history (17th-century West African slaves brought to work on Haiti's sugar cane plantations) and our first Hollywood zombies: *White Zombie* (1932), starring Bela Lugosi, and Jacques Tourneur's *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943). Some of us might even know our first pulp zombies: "Salt is Not for Slaves" (1931) by G.W. Hutter and "The House of Magnolias" (1932) by August Derleth, both published in *Weird Tales*. In those early days, no one was quite sure what zombies were or what they were capable of doing. We can pretty much all agree that it wasn't until George Romero's 1968 *Night of the Living Dead* that our minds exploded with horrible understanding. We all point to that moment in the graveyard—*They're coming to get you, Barbara*—and the 90 minutes that followed as the birth of one of the greatest collective nightmares ever spawned. What Romero and co-writer John Russo had at first envisioned as a horror comedy quickly evolved into an icon on par with Frankenstein's monster and Dracula. But while these latter versions of undead creatures have often been portrayed as tragic victims of an inhospitable world, zombies—the everyday human undead—have no redeeming qualities. We feel no sympathy for their loss of humanity, no empathy for their personal struggle—indeed there is no personal struggle, no personality whatsoever, in fact. Instead, plunged into the deepest pit of the uncanny valley, we feel only fear for these nameless, faceless hordes of nobodies. So it's no wonder that modern zombies and Romero's "rules" have endured for more than 50 years. Ambling, rotting, flesh-eating zombies have permeated virtually every corner of popular culture. But they have also invaded places we might think too far off the beaten path: childhood, poetry, even the kitchen! Let's take a look at how zombies fit into these realms with a few writers who have put zombies in some very interesting places: **Baileigh Higgins**, whose 10-book YA series *Children of the Apocalypse* was released this year as a boxed set; **Juan J. Morales**, author of *The Handyman's Guide to End Times: Poems*; and **Lauren Wilson**, the brains behind *The Walking Dead: The Official Cookbook and Survival Guide*.

## BAILEIGH HIGGINS

*Fiction is certainly the most familiar genre when it comes to zombies. So how does one stand out in the crowd? Perhaps by crowding the field. Baileigh Higgins has carved out a solid niche in the world of zombie fiction with her YA novels. She can barely keep up with her numerous books series that feed the furious demands of her ravenous fans.*

**Melissa Gish (MG):** Where did your interest in zombies begin?

**Baileigh Higgins (BH):** It first began with a movie, *Dawn of the Dead*. This classic from George A. Romero is still a favorite of mine, and I'm grateful for the fact that he brought the modern-day zombie to life. He's such an icon. My interest further developed when I began reading zombie apocalypse fiction. The first book I read was *As the World Dies* by Rhiannon Frater. I instantly became hooked by the plot and characters, and afterward, I dove into anything and everything zombie related.

**MG: Why do you think zombies are still popular? Where is their value?**

BH: I think they've endured because of their simplicity. They have no thoughts, no personalities, no intelligence of their own. In essence, they're a mindless shambling horde that provides the perfect backdrop to any kind of survival story. Because in the end, it's not about the zombies, it's about the people and how they choose to face the end of everything they've ever known. When civilization is stripped away, you cut to the heart of people and what they truly are beneath all the masks and glamour of society. That's when the real monsters come out, but it's also when true heroes are born.

Zombies are very versatile. They can be adapted for fun, comedic movies and games, or used to project horror with all its accompanying fear, blood, and gore. They can even be used to make a point about certain aspects of human nature and civilization. They make the perfect metaphor. I think that they can teach us to face death with courage and fortitude. That we can still love and hope no matter how tough it gets. I believe that all of us have the capacity for great good and great evil. It just depends on which side you allow to win. In the end, life is a choice, whereas death is inevitable.

**MG: So much of what's out there in terms of zombie stories is one-dimensional and simple gore. But your books combine elements of horror with adventure, character relationships, contemplation, hope, and heartbreak. Why is this important in telling your stories?**

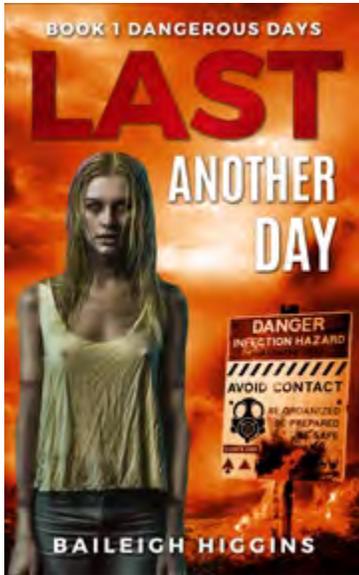
BH: I tell my stories from a perspective of hope, love, and triumph while still acknowledging the evil that's out there. There is beauty in tragedy and nobility in self-sacrifice, just like there is darkness in all of us. It's often our relationships with others that save us from that darkness, that keep us from giving up when all seems lost. That's why character relationships are so important to me. What wouldn't a parent do to save their child, or a wife a husband, or a brother a sister, after all? Or even a stranger?

**MG: Your characters are faced with tough decisions that impact their survival. Would you consider yourself a survivalist? Did you have to conduct research for your books?**

BH: I think that all of us have wondered what we would do in such situations. How we would react to challenges of such magnitude. If we'd even survive considering the odds. That's part of what makes this genre such fun to watch and read. I'm a writer who lives in an imaginary world. If faced with the real deal, I have no idea how I'd react, but I would like to think that I'd hold on to some semblance of humanity, at least. That I wouldn't give in to my darkest impulses and still be me at the end.



*Artwork courtesy B. Higgins*



EBook cover courtesy B. Higgins

**MG: Do you approach zombies differently for adult and young adult audiences?**

BH: I do. My YA books are cleaner and more suited to a younger audience, but there will always be an element of horror and gore, and there will always be a struggle for survival, tragedies, and even death. I believe that kids and teens are far more resilient than we give them credit for at times, and could handle just about anything thrown their way.

**MG: Are there advantages or disadvantages to writing your books as a series?**

BH: There are definite advantages to writing in series. Not only can I fully explore a particular set of characters and their world, but I can build complex relationships, bring in change and upheaval, tragedy and heartache, but also hope and resolution. Another plus is that readers will often read the sequels and become real fans, instead of moving on after one book and forgetting all about you.

**MG: What advice can you give new writers?**

BH: It's vital to let your own voice shine through. There will always be similarities between your story and the next, but your voice is unique and cannot be copied. Tell the story the way you want to tell it, and there will always be an audience for it.

## JUAN J. MORALES

*Zombies and poetry? Sounds like a perfect combination for parody. And yet, somewhat surprisingly, we take the zombies in Juan J. Morales's **The Handyman's Guide to End Times: Poems quite seriously. His zombies are a catalyst for reflection, introspection, and even judgment.***

**MG: What do you think has allowed Romero-esque zombies to endure and even flourish in recent years?**

Juan J. Morales (JM): Romero is a legend for a reason. He took zombies in a new direction from its historical connections to the voodoo myths and origins. *Night of the Living Dead* continues to resonate with us 51 years later because it's a low budget and brave movie that cast an African-American and a female protagonist. The ending of that movie also still bites hard. Meanwhile, the way *Dawn of the Dead* delivers the cautionary tale about zombies and consumerism could easily be seen as prophecy for smartphones and other technological luxuries disconnecting us from each other. Even though the zombies were blue in this one, it scared the hell out of me. Romero gave everyone permission to use the zombie and a reminder that horror, like sci-fi, is a genre that can take risks and innovate. It captures class war and shows the zombies as the monster of the people. The city overrun by zombies evokes clear associations with uprisings and rebellion. We usually identify with the survivors that fight to stay alive, but there are also times where we root for the hordes of the undead to tear it all down.



**MG: Like other “monster movie” creatures, zombies haven’t entirely shaken their B-horror movie reputation. As a serious writer, why include them in your poems?**

JM: Zombie flicks, comics, and shows all give us the full range of emotions. They’re gory, wild, terrifying, and funny as hell at the same time. They also represent a flexible form with so many ways to raise the stakes: the fast zombies in *28 Days Later*, combining the found footage horror with zombies in [REC], and the moving setting of *Train to Busan*. The possibilities remain endless. When I was younger and had those reoccurring dreams about zombies, I made sure to write them down to be sure I could preserve all the graphic and vivid details. Like in the poem, “My First Zombie,” I continually had the dream that inspired the poem when my mother was stricken with breast cancer. In other poems, I wanted to write about how the rules can be broken as well. Despite the paralyzing fears they provoked, writing these poems also spoke to me about the importance of family and protecting each other. Zombies compel us to band together in unlikely and strained alliances, and they give rise to the slackers, the weird, and the people who don’t quite fit into the world. Trust has to be earned and inevitably challenged. Zombies can come to represent opportunity if people survive the first wave of attacks and if they adapt.

**MG: How did the theme of the “end times” emerge in your latest collection?**

JM: I used to be honestly afraid of zombies, which became the primary manifestation of how I began exploring the end times. I would have reoccurring nightmares featuring the undead—my house overtaken, family turned, and then me being undead and put down. I remember times when I was house hunting and thinking in the back of my mind if the house could be “zombie proofed” and if it had the tools and items to fortify this house for riding out the apocalypse. I would plan escape routes and contingency plans if things went down, which was an absurd, dark, but fun way to play with my imagination.

To work through my fear of zombies and the end times, I read and watched everything I could to better understand what makes the end times tick, the conventions, and how to dissect it. I challenged myself to not look away in the gorier moments and learned about the different rules of the world. The quest for apocalyptic knowledge also led to a better understanding of what it all represents. Why are we fixated on our demise? The end times is an important entry point into ecopoetics and environmental issues, which remind us the end times stand in for the issues that we really want to talk about: overpopulation, climate change, pandemics, extinction, and our over-reliance on technology to name a few issues at stake.

**MG: It’s clear that these poems are personal and revealing. How do zombies fit in?**

JM: Along with being obsessed with zombies, an important relationship was ending when I started this book. That sent me on a journey to try and understand this as a personal apocalypse. Around the same time, I remember being alone in my house and watching the entire first season of *The Walking Dead* in one night. Sitting alone in my basement, I felt a mixture of fascination and devastation. It was a struggle at first to write so honestly about this relationship ending and to see if the apocalyptic landscape could be an appropriate way to explore this. Gradually, it became easier to absorb all these fears and start to assemble a zombie apocalypse and my version of the end times. And then the concerns grew outward with the intention of connecting with other people through the healing power of poems. From there, I started to also write more hopeful and humorous poems for the collection to give *Handyman* balance. The book became a journey out of the darkness and into light.

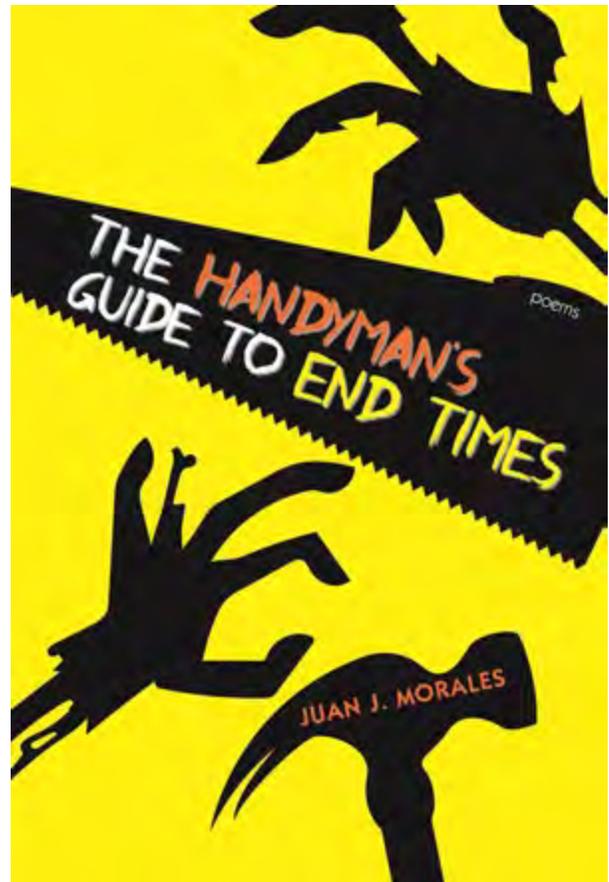
**MG: Your poems have a lot to say about human relationships, how people make choices to embrace their sense of humanity or turn their back on it. What do you think apocalypse scenarios can tell us about what it means to be human?**

JM: In a famous interview, George A. Romero once cynically called *The Walking Dead* “a soap opera with a zombie occasionally.” I can see where he’s coming from, but I still love the comic and the show. In the same way that viewers root for some characters to get killed, they also threaten to stop watching if a specific character doesn’t make it. The characters and world remind us that humanity needs to survive. There needs to be a storyteller to keep it going. I wanted to make sure my poems addressed that layer of conflict for the characters. In writing, we cannot protect our characters even if we want to. Plus, readers/viewers expect the struggle between compassion and violence to be explored in the end times.

Some other key elements in apocalyptic scenarios are the change in currency (usually ammo, weapons, water, food, and shelter) and putting characters into situations where they are asked how far are they willing to take it to survive. What/who will they sacrifice? How do the characters learn to inflict violence and cope with the inhumane things they do now that there are no rules? Ultimately, the zombie scenario usually sends characters on the journey where they lose and then rediscover their humanity, even this means realizing the atrocities they have committed. They work towards redemption and need friendship and love. Even Woody Harrelson’s quest for a Twinkie in *Zombieland* can be tied to his humanity.

**MG: With the influx of zombie material out there in recent years, what do you think makes a work unique?**

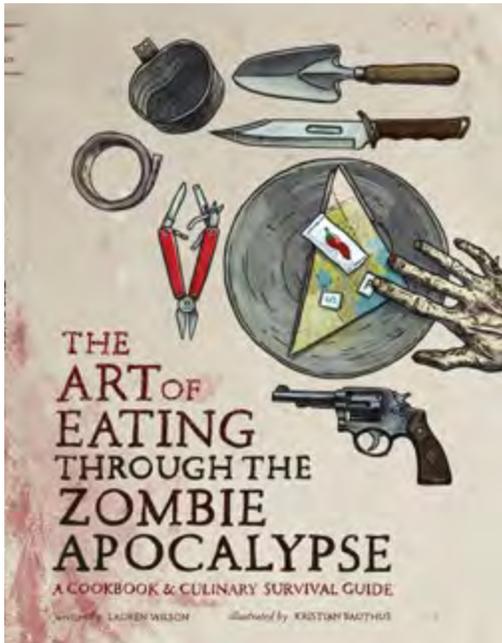
JM: There’s an almost overwhelming amount of zombie media out there, but because it’s flexible and part of the low-budget tradition, it will continue to coax creatives to share their version of the zombie apocalypse. The best zombie movies, books, and video games out there all balance engaging in the key criteria of the genre while also innovating or challenging it. It has to have the gore, destruction, and mayhem we come to expect, and it also has to have the compelling storytelling in its format or situation. Two favorites of mine are the novel *Zone One* by Colson Whitehead and Jess Walter’s story, “Don’t Eat Cat.” Both succeed because of the post-apocalyptic worlds they build, the zombie rules they challenge, and how they both explore human hubris and our hopes in rebuilding. Also, the use of zombies is not going to resonate if it’s just part of a gimmick. Even with readers/viewers willing to suspend their disbelief and accept a low-budget zombie, they won’t suffer a plot with zombies added because someone ran out of ideas.



Cover art courtesy J. Morales

# LAUREN WILSON

*The last place one might expect to find zombies is in the kitchen. Yet Lauren Wilson has crafted two books that provide serious instruction for not only surviving the zombie apocalypse but also eating well during the event. In the vast landscape of cookbooks on the market, zombies are what give Wilson's books a unique bite.*



Artwork courtesy L. Wilson

**MG: Can you tell us where your zombie fandom began?**

Lauren Wilson (LW): I can tell you exactly where my zombie fandom began. It was in my little brother Jarrod's bedroom, Christmas 2001. I was home from college for the holidays and my bro was having a sleepover. He and his friend were playing video games, and since we had always enjoyed playing video games together I joined in. They were playing a game called *Resident Evil*, perhaps the quintessential zombie game franchise, and pretty soon I had taken over and kicked them out and played through the entire night.

**MG: Here's the age-old question: Which do you prefer, slow zombies (ala Romero) or fast zombies (ala World War Z)?**

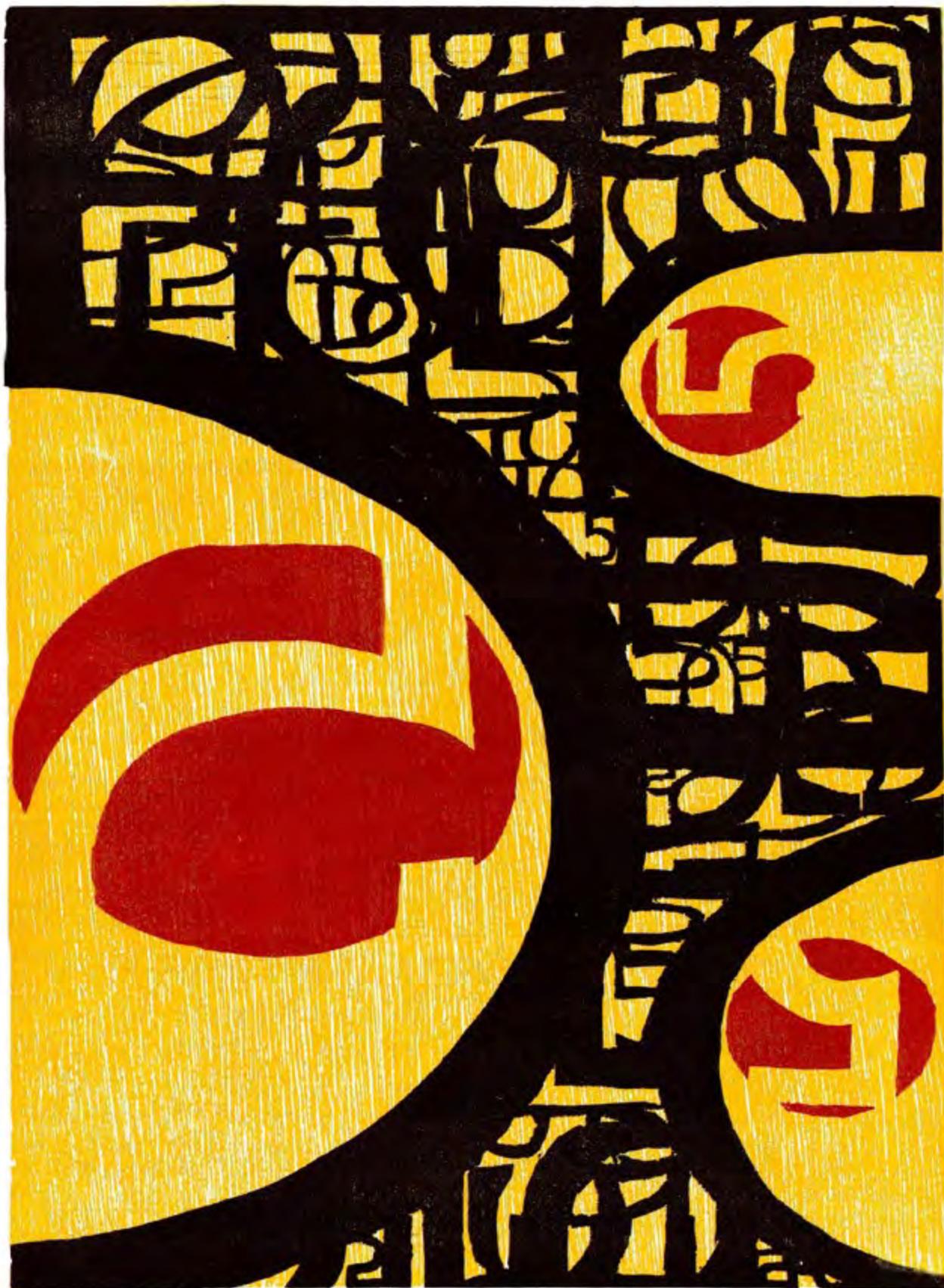
I am a slow zombie gal all the way. That said, *28 Days Later* was a good movie, and I kind of bought the premise because their zombies technically weren't dead but infected with a virus (which means no rigor mortis or decomposing corpse to slow you down).

**MG: What do you think has allowed zombies to endure since *Night of the Living Dead* and even flourish since *The Walking Dead*?**

LW: It's always been a topic I have wanted to delve into in a real academic/sociological kind of way. But if I were to just speculate off the cuff, I would say that zombies are "other," and stories of us against "other" (aliens, enemies, the man, etc.) have resonated since the dawn of story. It amazes me that the pop-culture interest is still going strong. Even the likes of Jim Jarmusch are still creating works for the canon—*The Dead Don't Die* is one of those rare zombie movies I actually liked.

**MG: What do you think characterizes the best zombie fiction?**

LW: Zombies are an interesting genre because there are tropes that are so tired but are still almost demanded by fans. A character hiding a zombie bite from their group, for example. So to me, the most interesting works are those that do all the expected cliché things but still manage to inject some freshness in the overarching plot or the aesthetic style. One such work that shines as a beacon of this is *Zone One* by Colson Whitehead. He is a literary powerhouse that decided to "genre slum" by writing a zombie novel. He did such interesting things with his universe, and then on top of that, his writing is beautiful. Great book.



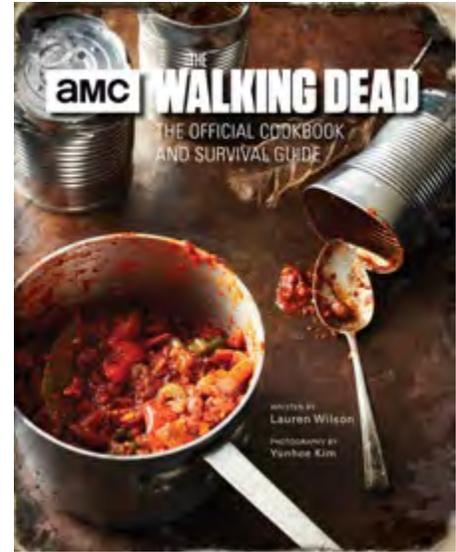
97

Fives

1969

**MG: Why cookbooks? This seems like such an odd (yet perfect) combination of themes. How did these books come about?**

LW: After graduating from college and working for a couple of years I decided to go to chef school, and so my career at the time was cooking professionally. One of my best friends, Paul, said to me one day, “You’re a zombie nerd and a food nerd, you should write a cookbook for the zombie apocalypse.” I thought it was a great idea but sat on it for three years. When I moved from Toronto to New York, *The Walking Dead* had just started and I was amazed that zombies seemed to be making it into the mainstream. Luckily I had some down time to actually start fleshing out the idea. I worked on the proposal for about a year, and then, because I had zero contacts in publishing, cold called every literary agent in New York City. I was so lucky to land my agent, Deborah Schneider, and eventually we sold *The Art of Eating* to the wonderful folks at Smart Pop. I did A TON of research because I had nary a survival skill when I started out with *The Art of Eating*. Between books and experiments and interviews and hunting trips, it was a very research intensive process. Because I had written *The Art of Eating*, I was approached by Insight Editions to write the cookbook they had planned to produce in partnership with AMC. It was, forgive the pun, a no-brainer for me.



Artwork courtesy L. Wilson

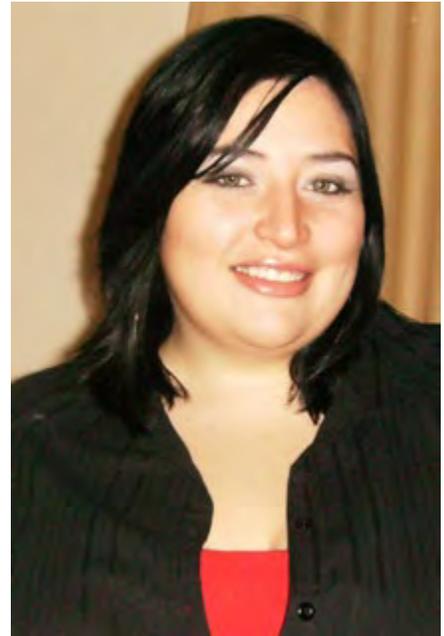


Clearly, there isn’t a single corner of the literary landscape that is safe from the hordes of undead relentlessly ambling toward a readership. With apparently no end in sight for these creatures, there are still many zombie stories to be told and zombie poems to be crafted. Creative writers will undoubtedly continue to find ways to serve up zombies to hungry readers. It seems even the most outlandish ideas for infusing a work with zombies is not beyond the realm of publication. One day, the zombie craze will fade in favor of a new monster, but until then, in the words of Rick Grimes, “Let’s keep trying as long as we can.”

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

### Baileigh Higgins

South African writer Baileigh Higgins lives in the Free State. Her unhealthy obsession with the end of the world has led to numerous books on the subject and a secret bunker, the location of which only she knows. She publishes her books through Amazon and has a large and loyal following, so much so that she has continued several series due to reader demand. A prolific writer, her series include *Death & Decay*, *Dangerous Days*, *Dangerous Nights*, *Death's Children*, *The Black Tide*, and *The Undead Adventures of Chas*.



*Baileigh Higgins, 2019*

*excerpt from Last Another Day, Book 1 of Dangerous Days (2018)*

“The woman ran towards her, feet slapping on the tar road as she closed the distance. The child cried, his mother half-carrying and half-dragging him. Morgan stared at the unfolding scene, and her heart sank when she realized the truth. “They’re not going to make it.” The infected man reached them and latched onto the boy first, ripping him out of his mother’s hands. Morgan looked away. She leaned over and locked the passenger door, the click loud in her ears. With an iron grip on the wheel, she steered the truck around the family and drove away. That was the last stop she made.”

*excerpt from Outbreak, Book 1 of Black Tide (2018)*

“When news of the disease first hit, we had prepared as best we could. We filled out pantry with bottled water, food, and toiletries. Dad withdrew his savings and bought a generator and a tank of fuel. I even started a vegetable garden. We received gloves and masks from the mobile clinics set up around the country and educated ourselves on the symptoms.

We were ready.

Now I didn’t know whether to laugh or cry at our naivety.

We were fools.”

## Juan J. Morales

Juan J. Morales is the author of *The Handyman's Guide to End Times: Poems* (2018, University of New Mexico Press) which was recently named the Winner of the 2019 Latino International Book Award in the Single Author in English Poetry category. He was born in the U.S. to an Ecuadorian mother and a Puerto Rican father. He grew up in Colorado and is the Director of Creative Writing and an Assistant Professor at Colorado State University-Pueblo. His other works include *Friday and the Year That Followed* (2006, Fairweather Books) and *The Siren World* (2015, Lithic Press).

All of these excerpts are from *The Handyman's Guide to End Times: Poems*.

*excerpt from "The Zombie Sisyphus Dream" by Juan J. Morales*

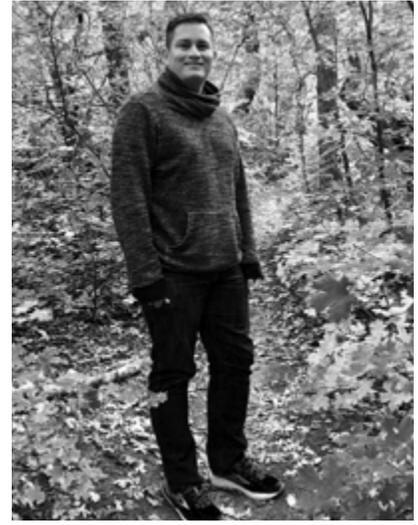
The head wears eyes  
that starve, jaw full of  
hungry gnashing,  
the neck gone except  
choice tendons dangling.

*excerpt from "Across The Overrun States" by Juan J. Morales*

I should check if I have enough lumber to board up  
my windows and doors, shaking off  
the probability of being an early-on casualty,  
but I can't decide if home is where  
I take a stand  
or if I'm supposed to abandon it.

*excerpt from "The Long Engagement" by Juan J. Morales*

I will walk beside you on the rubble streets and overstomped fields,  
resist picking the only flowers left  
for you, kill whatever is edible—in times of rationing and scavenging,  
in sleeplessness and dehydration, in fever and epidemic  
for as long as we both are human.



*Juan Morales, 2019*

## Lauren Wilson

Lauren Wilson completed culinary training at Toronto's George Brown Chef School in 2008. She is a professional cook and writer who also has experience in catering and teaching cooking classes. She lives in Brooklyn, New York. She is the author of *The Art of Eating through the Zombie Apocalypse: A Cookbook and Culinary Survival Guide* (2014, BenBella Books) and *The Walking Dead: The Official Cookbook and Survival Guide* (2017, Insight Editions). Her most recent work, a departure from the zombie world, is a collaboration with Eileen Konieczny, RN, called *Healing with CBD: How Cannabidiol Can Transform Your Health without the High* (Ulysses Press, 2018). She is currently writing another book on CBD for Snoop Dogg's media outlet Merry Jane. It will be published by Chronicle Books in the spring of 2020.



Lauren Wilson, 2019

*excerpt from The Art of Eating through the Zombie Apocalypse: A Cookbook and Culinary Survival Guide (2014, BenBella Books)*

“Who wants basic survival to be bland? By including a few small packets of herbs and spices, you can survive in a world teeming with the undead without forsaking flavor. Salt, pepper, cayenne, thyme, smoked paprika, curry powder, or any of your favorite flavor enhancers can be packed into labeled 1/4-inch resealable bags. You can also include a packet of sprouting seeds for an easy way to get a quick nutrient boost.”

*excerpt from The Art of Eating through the Zombie Apocalypse: A Cookbook and Culinary Survival Guide (2014, BenBella Books)*

“. . . if you're hanging around your home during the initial outbreak and wondering where you might be able to find some canned tuna, don't consider for a second hitting up the corner store or your local grocery store. Wal-Mart? Never. Not only are these the kind of places everyone else will have tried, leaving nothing left, but the zeds will be happily feasting on an hors d'oeuvre platter of stupidity and you'll be the cherry on top.”

*Recipes from The Walking Dead: The Official Cookbook and Survival Guide (2017, Insight Editions)*

Sweet Treats to Die For

“Carl's Chocolate Pudding”

“Carol's Beet and Acorn Cookies”

End of World Beverages and Libations

Alexandria Lemonade

Hershel's Healing Elderberry Tea

Putting Up: Food Preservation for End Times

Grady Memorial Dried Fruit Trail Mix

The Governor's Pickled Peppers

Dig In! Meals for Hungry Survivors

Negan's Spaghetti all'Arrabbiata

Oceanside Fish Stew

## Chew

When my husband and I were moving into our dream house last year after ten years of marriage (the third for each of us) and after moving out of our empty-nested Brady Bunch Mansion, we reveled in the awaiting paradise on our horizon. On which horizon stood our pastel blue, 1923 cottage, with its Key West style veranda, creaky oak floors and sun dappled front yard, two blocks from Sarasota Bay.

The camera filming our lives held steady that beautiful wide-angle scene as we shuffled boxes, unpacked, placed our belongings and hung pictures. Then the camera zoomed in on our cozy retreat. And that's when the creepy music began tinkling in the background.

We love our house and our new lives so much, when we first found the chew hole through the loaf of bread sitting on the counter over night, certainly, it was no big deal. "Oh, honey!" I sang from the kitchen, "We have a mouse in the house."

Taking a lunch break from unpacking, (after tossing out half the loaf of bread and making sandwiches with the remainder), I was dreamily looking out my new dining room window to the leafy back yard, when I saw a Big Black Rat sunning itself by the wooden swing. Do rats sun themselves? Aren't they nocturnal? Why was he looking at our house? I looked down at my sandwich. Could it be? (Cue creepy music again, louder this time.)

I called the company that the previous owner had used for pest control and termite tenting. They would be familiar with the house.

I was very pleased with the guy who showed up that afternoon. He walked around our house big-shouldered and scowling, like John Goodman's exterminator in *Arachnophobia*. "Yeah take that you rat, this guy will getcha. Unh Huh."

But the kid who showed up Monday morning to exterminate all rats forever from our dream house said to my husband, "I'm not sure what I'm supposed to do."

He eventually set some traps in the attic, set ominous black bait boxes around the perimeter of the house, like the ones you see around a Wal Mart in the country, and a few days later another guy—a rat deterrent expert I assume— showed up to foam-seal various cracks, holes and gaps around the house.

Meanwhile the skittering and pattering through our walls, ceiling, and floors drove me to insanity. "Squirrels on the roof," my husband said one morning at breakfast.

I didn't think so.

The lady we'd bought the house from had spent months away at a time, and after her husband died, she laxed on some general maintenance. We knew this from accompanying the home inspector around the house, where he showed us the screens covering the ten inch high crawl spaces had fallen away. Our house had been party time for the local rat population, and now they were break-dancing above my head early mornings while I drank my coffee.

After the Rat Patrol kid set the traps in the attic, I was awoken one night to a *thumpa-thump* above me. The thumping continued, and then an eep eep eep accompanied the *thumpa-thump*. I shook my husband awake. “Listen!

“Um, oh, yeah, we got a rat!” a man dreaming of the great kill, he awoke quickly.

I didn’t share in his excitement. “Well, what kind of trap is that? It’s not dead.” *Thumpa-thump, eep eep eep.*

“They put glue traps up there. He’ll be dead by morning, go back to sleep.”

I lay there looking at the ceiling. A few inches of drywall separating me from a dying rodent. I wondered, if only momentarily, if the walls would soon start to bleed.

The next day, after several panicked calls from me to the Rat Patrol to come fetch the trap, they showed up at two in the afternoon. I was at work, thankfully for them, for I was so livid and I felt weird, traumatized somehow. My house had been poisoned by an unseemly visitor, and they were taking their sweet time to retrieve the souring carcass.

At 2:30, my husband called to tell me what they found in the trap.

A LEG.

And now, I was afraid of my house. Its walls *were* bleeding. And somewhere, in those bloody walls, a three-legged rat was gimping around.

Hyperventilating at my desk, I called the Rat Patrol.

“I want real rat traps,” I told the lady on the phone, “Not these glue thingies.”

“Those are the most humane traps, it’s all we use,” she said in her fake customer service voice.

“Oh, really? A sticky rat chewing his leg off for hours is *humane*? I want giant rat traps with a guillotine to cut their heads off, Snap! Instant death! That’s humane.”

The next day the kid came back with proper rat traps and set them in the attic and some under the stairs.

Over the next several months, *snap-snap-snap*, traps went off. The Rat Patrol came to retrieve the carcasses. The break-dancing in the ceiling and walls wore down to some periodic waltzing, I kept calling the Rat Patrol to Seal Up This House! One night upstairs before bed, I heard a *snap-clamp-eep!* above me in the hallway. I told my husband, get this dying rat out of my attic now, or I’m going to a hotel to sleep. My husband called his agile son, down the attic access steps went, up he went with a plastic bag and a pair of tongs.

Out to the porch I went with a glass of rum, shaking with visceral fear.

My husband got excited over every rat caught. “We’re getting them!” he said, as if he was capturing every single fish in the sea.

“We need to prevent them from coming into the house in the first place,” I said, deadpan, beaten down.

“It’s like Whack-a-Mole, catch a few, ten return. What I want to know is: how are they getting in?” The Rat Patrol came and foamed and foamed, they sent out their expert foamer, he went onto the roof, we trimmed overhanging palm fronds. I bought sage and purified the house. I burned incense. I read stuff online that could work: peppermint, mothballs (the mothballs really stank up the place) then read that all this was bunk. Finally, the skittering through our walls and ceilings stopped.

But something else was going on during our first ten months in our new house. Over the ecstasy of gardening, bike riding, wine on the porch, small dinner parties, sunsets at the bay, there hung a repulsive scent in my kitchen. A scent that only I smelled, apparently. I have known that since I was a child, I beheld a keen sense of taste and smell, often detecting what others could not. My husband, through his glee in rat-trapping, smelled nothing. For me there was an olfactory disturbance mornings when I came downstairs in the dark to my kitchen, in anticipation of the peaceful aloneness of writing.

I smelled a rat. And once, in my kitchen, when I flicked on the light, I even saw a rat scamper into a space between the baseboard and kitchen cabinet left of the stove.

Rats, I learned perusing Google, do not have sphincters. They skitter and pitter, simultaneously.

No wonder they’re so damn gross.

So in addition to sage, incense, and now an apothecary diffuser with ylang-ylang and patchouli, there was bleach.

I had had enough. I’d had enough with men and their sissy traps and their sissy cans of foam and their sissy screens and steel wool. I put on my woman cape and called a friend of mine, a fabricator, who makes all things out of solid stainless steel.

“I need a rat screen,” I said to Darrell. “Sixteen gauge, perforated, eight feet long by ten inches high.”

He complied.

I hired a handyman to remove all the gunky orange foam and the sissy screen in front of the crawl spaces, and concrete in my new stainless steel barriers. I had him block up the space between kitchen cabinet and baseboard to the left of the stove.

“Un-hunh. Chew through THAT motherfuckers!” (John Goodman has nothing on me.)

The creepy music subsided. The walls stopped bleeding. For two weeks I was a proud superhero.

On Easter Sunday I came downstairs and was assaulted by The Smell. The previous day I had mopped the floor, bleached the counters and washed the rugs, but there was that smell again, a pungent, sour stench, like rotting diapers.

“I don’t smell anything,” my husband said.

“Of course you don’t.”

I considered that, after years of rat orgies under my kitchen, their smell had simply permeated the space

under the oak floor, and that fluctuations in humidity and bay breezes periodically carried in the scent. Someday, the scent will be gone, yes, for my new rat screen will keep those dreadful rodents away from my kitchen, my paradise, my forever house.

That afternoon, in the kitchen happily deboning a chicken for dinner and listening to Americana music, there was a bump in the cabinet by the wine glasses. *Eep-Eep*.

I snapped to attention, tip-toed out of the kitchen and turned down the music on my computer. No. Could it be? Silence except for birds chirping outside. I stood for several minutes, mind racing, poised in attack stance, chicken-fat hands raised, still gripping boning knife. The ice maker clunked. Sure, that's what it was, I told my hyper-alert self. Music turned back up. Back to kitchen to rub garlic and rosemary on the poultry.

While garlic and Americana permeated the air, a *boom-crash!* stopped my heart. My head whipped toward the sound to see the creature landing on the oak floor from under the wine glass cabinet, the *tinka-tink* of razor sharp claws skidding along the wood. It ran straight toward me along the baseboards under the dishwasher and kitchen sink, my Psycho-shower-screams driving it to do a three-sixty and scurry back into whatever space he'd been inhabiting. Husband running into the kitchen, fear drawn onto his face. "What's wrong?"

"This is MY kitchen! MY fucking kitchen!" I ranted. "Why is he running around in the daytime? How did he get in to my house? HOW did he get in? Put a trap there right now!" Pointing, with shaky finger, at the space under the cupboard.

Hubby went to fetch a trap. My breaths were short and ineffective. I had seen Death, a ten-inch long, bloated gray Death, crashing into my peaceful kitchen, a stinking, plague-ridden festering creature, who left the ghost of terror in its wake. I struggled with the refrigerator door, adrenalin rocking my nervous system. I snatched a beer and asked hubby for the opener, for I couldn't walk *over there* where *that thing* had come from under the cupboard. "Stay in here with me please while I cook?" I asked hubby. "I can't be in here alone, with *it*." Godammit! Why is it in here?" I whined.

*Thumpa-thump* it answered from under the cupboard. I jumped up into a triceps dip on the kitchen counter, heart in my throat, feet kicking above the floor.

"I think maybe it's trapped inside the house," Hubby said. "Your rat screen worked too well."

Bill Wolak

*Like Shadows Climbing the Moonlight*



## *We The Faithful*

We are keeping our FitzJava's operational, no matter what it takes. Up and down Lindenwood Village Center you won't see a living soul in the Family Shoe Barn, or the Subway, or even HomeStuffCo. Link's Sporting Goods is a massive, dark shell of a store, but a Going Out of Business sign has been loitering in the front window for years now so it hardly counts.

All of us—customers, baristas, and managers—are pitching in. The imitation gas lights glow, the coffee is hot enough to scald, and our consensus favorite non-holiday playlists rotate through ethereal folk rock and the occasional Celtic ballad.

I do my part. Early on, I donated a 4000 watt gas-powered generator. It's a real beast, meant to power an entire home. I never refer to it as my generator. It's our generator, the generator.

The baristas, younger than most of the customers by a decade, have all stayed on. FitzJava's cultivates an egalitarian ethic, all the way down to the trainees, and the benefits are competitive considering you are slinging coffee. Barb keeps an entire side of her head shaved tight, and Sasha's vine tattoo crawls out from under her FitzJava's polo and ends in a curl of barbed wire at the bony prominence of her wrist. The boys maintain crisp and even beards, and at least one of them is gay. "PRIDE!" his favorite t-shirt exclaims. I have never known quite how to broach the subject with him, his gayness and my unwavering support of it. Sexual orientation does not matter to me. Even less so under current circumstances.

Before all of this, when they were entry-level employees with decent health insurance and I was perhaps the most loyal and dependable FitzJava's customer ever, I suspected they judged us for our suburban foibles. The way we fumbled over the names of the new drinks. Our difficulties paying by phone. I imagined they ridiculed us after we left and caricatured us on their blogs. But now we've been through everything together. Esprit de Corps and all that.

Just last weekend, Barb pedalled off on her reconditioned Schwinn Collegiate, a bicycle I suspect she appreciates in a purely ironic fashion, in search of supplies: beans, filters, napkins, and cups. Steven, the Opening Manager and the closest thing to a boss around here, handed her a hand-drawn map of every FitzJava's franchise in a ten-mile radius. In a scene evocative of a pioneer saga, we stood together at the front window and watched squat Barb bob up and down with each pedal stroke. Across the parking lot she became a silhouette, finally disappearing behind the burnt-out AmeriBank building. Steven repeats every day that we should not even begin to worry about Barb, but I do. She has been serving the coffee here for as long as I can remember. She knows about Nancy and I. That I live alone now. I can tell from the questions she asks that she is an excellent listener. Are the kids coming into town any time soon? Do they remember to call? Have you figured out that skunk situation yet?

"Anything for some of the Colombian! Just a pound!" we laugh over our specialty drinks, now brewed with beans from Burundi and Togo and island nations even I would be hard-pressed to locate on a map. But the cups, oh the cups! We pray silently. We cherish them. Had we ever truly understood, in our previous well-caffeinated lives, what it meant to cherish an object?

The FitzJava's hot cup is 40% post-consumer waste, a paper replica of an Imperial pint glass, all the

way down to the soft round rim near the top, which we sometimes rub and sometimes tap with nervous energy. Each cup is emblazoned with a faded beer logo that evokes the weathered shingle that might hang outside your favorite public house in County Cork. The expertly crafted brands don't exist—never have—but they are believable stouts, porters, and ales. Is it too much to hope, we wonder out loud, that perhaps one franchise will have stockpiled some of the cups?

Steven and the crew have stacked the last of our cups in a pyramid on top of the espresso machine. We re-use old cups until they disintegrate into soggy pulp in our hands. We bring distinctly non-FitzJava's mugs from home. They will not pull from this last stash, no matter how strenuously we beg and cajole.

“Please!” we coo, “we miss the way that ridge felt in our hands.”

Calm used to wash over us when we slid our coffees, so hot we cradled them with the pads of our fingers, into receptacles in the middle panels of our automobiles. How safe we felt walking into board meetings and anxiety-inducing family gatherings with our FitzJava's.

A newcomer might interpret our pyramid as nostalgic, even desperate. But we understand it as a promise. Things will get better. We'll have our coffee and our signature drinks in the to-go cups we've grown accustomed to.

In the terrible first days, we boarded the windows and fortified the doors—we couldn't accept everybody into our FitzJava's family. We sipped our drinks in the dark, whisper-hissing our conversations: When might we expect some relief? Which of our neighbors had gone missing? Had anyone picked up a signal?

The crowds outside heard us, or perhaps they smelled the coffee brewing. They thrashed at the door.

“What are you doing in there?” they called out, “What do you have?”

It was like they'd forgotten what FitzJava's was about, asking such obvious questions.

“Community!” I was tempted to shout back through the boards on several occasions. My chest filled up with protective urges.

But we had agreed to stay absolutely quiet. We had distributed the baseball bats and hockey sticks and titanium drivers we'd found at Link's. We gripped them too hard and flexed our fingers every few minutes to restore the blood flow.

Steven issued hushed instructions to the baristas, motioning towards the back room. These were difficult moments for those of us with weaker constitutions. Impassioned and articulate arguments were made, that we must let everyone in. One elderly woman, someone none of us could quite place, certainly not a regular, had the gall to remind us of our Christian duty. Somehow she had come up with a fireplace poker, but the way she let it drag on the floor it was clear she wasn't going to use it, no matter how bad things got.

Mitchell, still massive from his football days, his forearms rigid and grooved with muscle, offered to clear the crowd out.

“We don't want them coming back,” he said, lips pressed hard and flat with his willingness. The bat he held was beautiful ash, shiny with lacquer, the sort of thing that ought to be displayed in a museum.

We talked everyone, on both sides, down. Most of the rules of society—hospitality, goodwill, empathy—didn't apply just now, I argued. But there were some lines we couldn't cross. I said this last part mainly for Mitchell to hear.

“Water, water!” they called periodically, once they realized they weren't going to get the barricades down. “People are dying out here! What are you doing in there?”



Always back to that. Like they didn't know what went on at a FitzJava's.

We are not ignorant or stupid. We do not have our heads in the sand. We know that things are changing faster than ever before, with no respect for tradition. Nothing is privileged because it is How Things Were Once Done.

We like to act out the birth of the FitzJava's concept. We envision a board room. Who was brave enough to make that first pitch, we wonder? Who suggested a high-end coffee shop that recreated an Irish pub in every way except for the liquor? Mahogany bar, brass bar stools, taps that delivered coffee, every detail all the way down to those pint cups. How derisive the laughter must have been. What, are you trying to give our last market share away to Starbucks?

When had they realized the stroke of genius, a true public house without all the clutter of liquor licenses and unruly drunk behaviors? One needn't hold a degree in advertising to understand that a consumer could effectively have only one serious alcohol experience a day. But they could return time and again for coffee or a variation on coffee or a snack deemed appropriate with coffee. Once FitzJava's had saturated a metropolitan area, loyal customers could plan their day around coffee breaks. We realize no one calls them coffee breaks anymore. We say it anyway.



Leadership has been thrust upon me. Plato believed, and I am inclined to agree, that to be just, leaders must act for the betterment of their followers. Steven runs the business end of things, no question, but there's much more involved in maintaining our community. There was the generator of course, and it had been my call, after a month, when the time was right, to take down the boards. The riotous crowds had given up and dispersed. Hardly anyone was crossing Village Center parking lot anymore, and with our south-facing front windows open to the sun all day, we hoped we might feel normal again. Our numbers had begun to dwindle. We could use new customers. We ought to consider ourselves open for business.

I drew up a schedule so that there would always be someone at the tables at the front windows, where we could see to the edge of the lot. One or two of us volunteered to sleep at our FitzJava's each night. None of us truly relished returning home at this point.

Full disclosure: folks here may have made certain assumptions about me, based on my age, the MIA/POW hat I favor, and my knowledge of military history. I did not, but could have, fought in Vietnam. I am of that age. Several friends of mine did not return from Southeast Asia.

Occasionally someone makes their way to our door. We always see them coming, squinting at our gleaming storefront like a treacherous mirage in the desert. We don't hide anymore. These are prospective members of our community. We welcome them. We start a fresh urn of coffee.

When the scavengers come at night, we are ready. The last group, the most insistent and desperate, took a crowbar to the lock on the service door. We heard them, of course, and were there to greet them when they finally wrenched the door open. There were four of us, a true team effort. Steven, one of the baristas—I swear I cannot keep the boys separate in my head—Mitchell, and myself. There were either five or six of the raiders. We have not been able to agree on the number. They wore soiled clothes and mismatched padded gear, as if they were on their way to a friendly game of tackle football.

They were not willing to leave, that much was clear immediately, but I don't believe they understood our level of preparedness. We had not been sitting all these weeks sipping cappuccino and discussing the weather. And here I will take some credit. I was the one who organized the foraging parties up and down the Center. I stacked the cases of water and canned food we found in the grocery store that anchors Village Center. I collected the tools from the hardware store, and everything from the sporting goods store. The bats, the sticks, the shotguns, the cartridges. Look at this dear Nancy, I laughed to myself as I organized the back room, being a neat freak and a workaholic and a pack rat all wrapped up in one has finally paid off.

I have never recounted exactly what happened in that back hallway, an area of FitzJava's usually reserved solely for employees. It was dark for my aging eyes, the sounds a bewildering scramble of grunts and shouts. Then a gunshot. One never realizes this until it happens, but when a gun goes off in a closed area it lights the scene intensely, completely, while it swallows every possible particle of sound. Steven and I each had one of the shotguns, and it was Steven who fired. In the overexposed moment revealed by his shot, I saw how high the shotgun had bucked back in his hands, like it might be trying to break free and fly away. One of the invaders was on the floor, mouth open in a perfect circle, gripping at the area between his chest and his legs.

A high-pitched ringing was jabbing at my ears, and it was difficult to know what happened after that. I held my shotgun far out in front of me and shouted warnings, admonitions, how I didn't want to be forced to do anything. How it wouldn't be worth it. We were almost out of coffee, for God's sake.

When my hearing came back, I could make out the sound of the others struggling. In particular I could hear Mitchell's feet scraping on the floor. He was exhaling regularly, rhythmically, the way you are supposed to when you lift weights. He was laying into somebody. Mitchell had lost his whole family in the earliest most violent days, earlier than any of us; every time he connected I heard him sighing with relief. Thud, thud, regular, easy. Whomever he was hitting wasn't giving anything back.

Now there was pleading. Soft childlike don't-make-me-go-to-bed begging, but from an adult voice I didn't recognize.

“Please, stop, We—we're done . . . “

Steven's gun went off again. The back hall was filled up with the sound and the smell of shot. The back door flew open, and in the sliver of moonlight I could see the scavengers who were still on their feet getting away from us posthaste. They had an old truck and they burned rubber out of there. Like we were going to chase after them.

We hauled the bodies, three of them, out beyond the back parking lot and over the berm where we never liked to go. We were shaking, all four of us, but the only real damage was Mitchell's bloody nose. He was smiling widely, pushing the blood around with his tongue. Steven was white as a sheet. I took the shotgun from him and he didn't try to hold onto it.

Barb has not returned. We try not to fear the worst. We are careful not to add her to the list of those we know, for certain, to be gone. We imagine her camped out at another FitzJava's with its own unique surpluses and deficits. Maybe she has adopted it, and is keeping it going all by herself.

We are detecting a change in the coffee. It is lighter in color, with a tinny aftertaste. Some of us have to drink two pints to get our customary caffeine buzz. Which of course isn't helping the situation.

"Please," we heckle good-naturedly over the counter, "tell us it's just weaker than usual. Tell us you aren't cutting it with that instant crap."



I am on watch when Steven leaves. He has not been the same since the hallway incident. Cloudy stains have begun to appear down the front of his forest green FitzJava's polo shirt. He steps outside, and appears to be examining the sidewalk, which makes perfect sense—we do try to keep it clear. The sun is particularly bright; unfiltered is the word that comes to mind. It is the sort of day that, in the old world we still remember, would have sent us scurrying into air conditioning. He stands at the edge of the sidewalk, now surveying the storefronts, every one of them empty. I pull myself out of my seat. What's out there, buddy? I say under my breath. He squints straight west, into the sun. I know very well that he has an excellent pair of Ray-Bans, but they are nowhere to be seen, not even tucked in his shirt collar. It's like he means to soak up as much of the heat and light as possible. Which worries me. We haven't run the air conditioning for weeks and won't be turning it on any time soon to cool him, or anybody, off.

Steven spreads his arms and stretches back yoga-style. He stretches so far that his shirt comes untucked. It is the sort of thing you might expect to see in a pharmaceutical commercial, at the end, when the patient has transcended his persistent itch or his social phobias. He looks back at the immaculate windows of our FitzJava's, the FitzJava's we have been working so hard to keep alive. He must see me sitting there, faithful to the watch, because he makes a face, one of those tight-chinned grins that might be a grimace or might be the hesitant beginning of a smile. His eyes are different from how I remember them. Maybe he is squinting at that blazing empty sky, or maybe they are floating around in the sockets—I don't get a chance to ferret that out, what is wrong with his eyes.

Steven steps into the parking lot and in two strides he is jogging. He has a loose athletic stride. He bounces away from us like he has been planning this all along, an afternoon run, and he doesn't look back.

No one is surprised when I tell them. We all agree that Steven hadn't been bringing his customary positive attitude to work lately. He'd taken to standing just inside the front door, staring across the parking lot. With plenty to be done around the store.

The Steven episode reminds me of one of our favorite games from the days before. Whenever a customer placed their coffee on top of their car, we would take wagers on the drink's fate. Would they realize their mistake before it tumbled off, would it spill over their windshield the first time they touched the brakes, would it ride upright and pristine all the way out of the lot and the limits of our vision?



We faithful are disappearing one at a time. No one new, not even any scavengers, visits our FitzJava's. The distinction between customers and employees has melted away, and we all don the beige apron now, brewing fresh coffee and foaming milk, running the blender that crackles and spits no matter how small the drink, and is certainly going to die out any day now.

In the slowest hours of the early evening, with most of the tables empty, we wonder if this is really a refuge at all. Everyone else is in their tomb, and we consider the possibility that this will be ours.

On the best days something small and fortuitous happens to interrupt these ominous thoughts. The playlist strikes up a familiar tune that evokes pleasant memories, or one of our regulars makes a miraculous and wild-eyed return. We listen to their tales of survival and serve them terrible coffee on the house. But the still silences between these moments seem to be lengthening. We might as well use the last of the paper cups.



## *A Small Moment with the Tulsa Oklahoma Zombie Orchestra*

The most horrific thing about the zombie apocalypse, by far, for me, at least, has been the music. I should probably explain. I'm third drummer for the Tulsa Oklahoma Orchestra and our mission is simply to supply the appropriate score for each ghoulish feasting and climactic inevitable chase scene and hero-being-swallowed-into-a-horde moment. It's a good job. And by a good job I mean a safe job. A relatively safe job. We're positioned on a roof overlooking the city where we can see just about everything. A strategic location. And they drop food supplies down for us on every other Wednesday. And occasionally the Army takes a few of us and puts us on a helicopter and we fly low to the ground to attempt to supply a crescendo to the furthest outreaches of the city where children are screaming in a field and some background music just seems necessary to fully express the horror. But you can't hear much over those rotor blades, so the oboe gets drowned out in the whole fiasco.

I tried to argue that we don't need music. That, in fact, they should give us something like guns or pepper spray or Bibles, but the mayor said every city is doing this and Tulsa isn't going to go against America, whatever that means.

I tried to argue that the mayor's now dead, but the double reed said she was still here in spirit.

I also argued that they should get a drummer who can actually play the drums, but they explained that all of the other drummers are dead, except the first drummer. The second drummer, by the way, is dead, but they continue to call me the third drummer out of respect for him, but sometimes they slip up and call me the second drummer. I point out that I can't play the drums at all and so "drummer" is a misnomer and they tell me to shut up and keep drumming or they'll throw me over the edge of the roof.

The good thing is that I've found out there really isn't that much drumming in orchestral scores. I mostly just stand there and watch the apocalypse happen. There aren't really too many humans anymore, in fact. So it's mostly just providing a score for a bunch of zombies lollygagging around. For some reason we've decided that should sound like a cello playing the same three notes over and over, which leaves the rest of us with a lot of free time. We mostly just watch the sunset, watch the horde, watch the moon, watch the horde, watch the sunrise, watch the horde, watch the sun set again.

Sometimes I watch the first cello player and it's not like I'm watching someone slowly going insane; it's more like I'm watching someone who is already completely and totally insane playing a cello. And I think we're kind of appreciative of her commitment.

We don't have any tubas or keyboards or piccolos or guitars or timpani in the orchestra. We do have a few triangles though.

The first triangle player, Laticia, stands near me and she complains a lot. She played triangle for the real Tulsa Oklahoma Orchestra, the one that would do music like Beethoven's Fifth Symphony and Bach's Fifth Symphony and Bill's Fifth Symphony. As you can see, I don't know much about music. I'm just assuming there has to be someone named Bill out there who has written at least five symphonies like Beethoven did. Laticia is really pissed we don't have any piccolos or tubas, because she said that's not a real orchestra then,

because real orchestras have instruments and to be honest I don't even have drums. They have me hitting sticks against an old sofa that people used to smoke weed in. I told them I could hit the side of the building, as that would be louder, but they told me that the sofa is going to have to be my drum kit just like the piano player is really playing a chimney, so I just stand here next to the sofa and occasionally hit it when I want.

Laticia told me that Marco Beltrami, when he was scoring *World War Z*, actually took a bunch of lion skulls and raccoon skulls and javelina skulls and would beat on those as it gave a creepy element and she said that we should be trying harder to really give some impressive sounds considering the world was ending. I wanted to ask what the hell a javelina is, but she just continued, saying that we were like the violinists on the *Titanic* and that if we viewed ourselves that way, then this whole entire thing was sort of romantic.

And she asked me to kiss her so I did. And while we were kissing I thought that maybe we should try to escape, but then something beautiful happened, other than escape. The second cellist saw us kissing and so he started playing this gorgeous soaring cello line. I opened my eyes and saw his meet mine and there was so much joy there, hope. He wasn't a previous orchestra member like Laticia, but he had been playing alone in his bedroom for years and this was the type of music he loved—romantic comedy. At the same time, right behind him, distant on a hill, I saw a zombie eating the chef from a restaurant I used to go to before the virus decided to end filmgoing and art galleries and football matches and poetry readings forever. But music, I felt in my lungs, was still surviving and I was proudly a part of it. The trombonist joined in. We only had one due to the second and third trombonists, of course, being dead. And then all three bassoonists built beautiful additions to the cellist's line. And they were playing real bassoons too, not an old mop handle like the second flutist was doing.

And so we kissed harder to encourage them and because it felt good and because there is a thing that happens when you kiss someone and you either feel like this is someone you could fall in love with or someone who you wouldn't mind hanging out with on a few weekends each year but that's it, and with Laticia I was feeling a waterfall in my ventricles, so I was stunned when I noticed Laticia wasn't focusing on me with the total dedication I was doing with her lips, and I felt Laticia reaching around for something, reaching around, reaching, and she grabbed her prized triangle, and while still continuing to kiss me, she struck her instrument at the very precise moment where it added the most perfect touch to what all of the other musicians were playing and it was like musical notes kissing the stained glass in a church.

## *Branta Canadensis*

“Where are the geese?” William wanders through Victoria Park, whose lush gardens, tall trees and calm artificial lake represent the only hint of nature in a cluttered urban landscape. More than two hundred resident geese disappeared overnight, two days earlier, and are still missing. Like a cake without icing, their absence is jarring and sad. William suspects fecal matter is to blame – and parents tired of seeing balls of semi-digested, wet grass squished between their children’s toes.

Crossing the decorative footbridge onto a small island, William discovers several posters tacked on trees, urging citizens to protest the slaughter of innocent animals. They allege laws protecting geese have been scrapped and claim the birds are being used in dog food, wieners and baby formula. Digitally altered pictures show a line of Canada geese waddling past the Auschwitz administration building.



The previous winter, during William’s early morning walks, he and the geese were often the only living things in the frigid park. Their water source frozen, food supply buried in snow, the geese huddled together, refusing to migrate. William admired their tenacity.

Winter ended when a cluster of crocuses sprang from a muddy flowerbed. A hint of green shimmered on the lawn and tiny buds unfolded on maple trees. Two geese led a flotilla of ten tiny goslings across the pond. As he witnessed the joyful spectacle, William’s city of pavement, concrete, bricks and glass – and traffic and plastic – vanished.

Each sunrise brought something new. Brilliant daffodils burst to life the same day another pair of geese paraded their young across the path, six this time, dusky yellow with dark beaks and feet. When tulips bloomed in soft pastel shades, yet another gaggle of geese, nine young in tow, shuffled across the bright green lawn.

One breeding pair produced an astounding seventeen offspring. William counted as the downy creatures hobbled past sprouts of grape hyacinth that hadn’t existed the previous morning. He *recounted* during each visit, relieved none had been nabbed by nocturnal predators. By the time irises decorated the landscape with strands and curls of purple and yellow, a total of forty-nine goslings sauntered round the grounds, shaded by a canopy of rustling leaves.

Crouching, William watched a flock of adults and their young trundle toward him. They parted, unconcerned; half went to his right, half to his left, paying him no more attention than they would a rock in their path. No fear existed in the eyes of mature geese, only pride.

Chicks grew darker, yellow fluff faded to dusty brown. Feathers appeared. By the time lilacs scented the air, the eldest goslings displayed traces of their species’ distinctive white slash, stretching upward from their throats, reaching behind their eyes.

Teenagers after just five weeks, William knew they’d soon be indistinguishable from their parents.

The first day of summer coincided with the moment compact pink bulbs of peonies opened to reveal fist-

sized, tissue papery blossoms. In the heat, the park's splash pad was turned on. Through steel grates and from tall, shiny posts, water jets shot liquid streams at different angles and velocities. Rainbows quivered in the mist. One hundred hyperactive children screamed and shouted as they charged across slick concrete.

Last to bloom were daylilies. Dominating the large flower bed, they painted a rich swath of orange across a green landscape. Appreciating the contrast, William noticed the grassy bank, where many of the gaggle preferred to graze, stood empty. No geese swam, either. Like ephemeral spring flowers, they had completely disappeared. Squirrels stood on hind legs, sniffing, searching, wondering if the change was permanent. Ducks waddled across the lawn, smug in their enjoyment of unfettered access to grazing space.

Had the flock flown away? Were hordes of rowdy children too much for them to bear? Feeling empty and alone for the first time since retirement, William considered reaching out to his ex-wife.



After finding the protest posters, dreadful scenes unfold in William's mind. He imagines city officials hunting and corralling geese in a pre-dawn raid, separating old and young, forcing them into cages for transport to a remote liquidation site. It makes him furious. He thinks of the winged mothers who've spent months protecting and fretting, teaching their young to feed and fend for themselves, only to be slain alongside them.

William calls city hall and is transferred seven times before reaching his elected representative, who confirms the geese "were removed in response to complaints of a sanitary nature."

"You're worried about goose poop while we shit strip malls into their habitat? Can't we grant them one tiny space?"

"We've invested a great deal in city parks. Fecal matter is a pollutant; we have to ensure Victoria Park remains viable for public use."

"All geese do is transfer yard clippings from one spot to another. Haven't you heard the expression: 'like grass through a goose?' What if I say screaming kids make the place unviable for me, will you round up all the children?"

The conversation deteriorates but William receives assurances Canada geese are still protected by federal laws and international agreements. He's also informed the birds in question are together, living happily on undisclosed private property, fifty miles away.

Hanging up, William despairs living in a society that craves nature – as long as it isn't *too natural*.

William doubts the bureaucratic response as much as he distrusts the venomous posters. He imagines a renegade band of militant vegans storming city hall, while overprotective parents shake their heads in pity and disgust. But it's an election year and sensational tactics prove effective. Meeting notices appear; resolutions are introduced. William attends several council sessions. He wants proof the geese are alive. If any are, he'll insist on their return to Victoria Park but debate never progresses beyond "zoonotic diseases" and "defecation frequency."

Unwilling to join either side, William finds the park too dispiriting to walk through. By late fall, days before the election, rumblings of a compromise emerge. From his balcony, four blocks away, denuded tree tops remind William of wounded soldiers, standing at attention, in memory of fallen comrades. He doubts the players in this farce are capable of resolving the issue but decides to see for himself.

The grounds look as expected on a late October day: desolate flower beds, a few dog walkers dressed in layers, the last remaining squirrels, but no geese.

Except two – in the form of synthetic polymer statues. A mother goose, tall as a city bus, leads a smaller, puffy yellow gosling across a concrete slab. A bronze plaque identifies them only as “*Branta Canadensis*.” Studying the larger figure, William senses kinship and recognition. He suspects the artist was allowed to visit the unnamed location to draft initial sketches.

Atop the fabricated baby goose, a woman holds a small child and encourages the wailing infant to ride it like a toy. Snot, oozing down his pink, chubby face, is ignored by the mother, who continues coaxing enthusiasm. William pictures her doing the same thing to the child on Santa’s knee at Christmas.

Next to the mother goose, a couple who look like professional models sporting the latest fall fashions, take pictures of themselves, trying to get the painted goose’s face into the frame. They snap away, all smiles and teeth, completely oblivious to the sad, synthetic eyes looking down.

## *Mom's Lessons*

### *On manners:*

Cross your legs when you sit. Us woman, we don't need to take up so much space. Don't eat with your hands. Is that how you're going to eat when you go on a date? Stop chewing your food like that. A lady should always keep her mouth closed.

### *On education:*

Talk to your brother. He won't listen to me. He listens to you. Tell him to do his homework. Forget about that university. It's too far. I'm not letting you go. You should go to college here. Elba's daughter is studying Psychology, and she goes to community college here. Why do you want to abandon me? Where did I go wrong raising you?

### *On children:*

My children are my whole life. It's not natural, these women that don't want children. It's not right. Don't ever have children. Children are so ungrateful. They'll ruin your life. This is your fault. You tossed coins in all those fountains, wishing for a brother. It's your fault he's here.

### *On health:*

You have to watch what you eat because obesity runs in your father's side of the family. You've gotten fat. College has made you fat. I'm telling you because I care. Don't eat that! I bought those for your brother. He's skinny, he can eat them. Why are you crying? Stop crying. I'm your mom, I can tell you these things. Look at your aunt and uncles. Is that how you want to end up?

### *On dating:*

Men only value women they can't have sex with. Why do you think your father married me? Sex is not love. Why'd you do that? That's not you. I know you, you're like me. You're a romantic, we've always been romantics. Don't be that girl. I know you're not that girl.

### *On marriage:*

When are you getting married? If you're going to live together, why don't you just get married already? Poor, guy. You never cook anything for him. When are you going to grow up? Women cook for their men. I'm going to make his favorite food when I come visit. I'm getting old. When are you going to give me grandchildren? How can you say that? Every woman needs to have children. I know you don't mean that.

### *On smiling:*

Look this picture of you. I keep it in my wallet, so I can show it to everyone. You look so cute here. Look how you're smiling with your mouth closed. Oh, you were so perfect. I love that mouth closed.

## *The Poetics of Panic*

Paranoia is truly a kind of poetics, a weaving of images around the limitations of the human situation, the plight of a peculiarly limited organism.

Ernest Becket, *Angel in Armor*

Twenty years ago panic attacks remained explosively sealed in the taboo closet. People were having them of course, but the “experts” knew little about etiology and underlying psychosomatic mechanisms, much less prognoses. Diagnostic tools were Paleolithic. Panic embarrassed both its casualties as well as physicians, though now, as I write, the disorder has gone mainstream. Every second magazine on supermarket racks boasts an article about panic in general or the autobiographical account of some new victim. Panic has indeed blossomed into a kind of faddish yet horrific fleur du mal. Even the most macho of men, football players, number among the afflicted. Students also swell the ranks. Whenever I bring up the issue in class, two or three new cases declare themselves. The illness yearns for group succor.

Authorities today have learned enough to make self-assured, standardized medical pronouncements. Panic attacks, they say, while often associated with long standing anxiety disorder, can occur spontaneously, out of the blue as it were. Victims sense imminent, horrific death and rush to the nearest emergency room, fearing a heart attack or stroke. For no apparent reason, the brain stem gushes noradrenalin (a neurotransmitter and stress hormone) into the neo-cortex, precipitating fuzzy judgment, confusion and fear. Simultaneously, the pupils dilate and vision distorts; the chest muscles contract (we mistake the ensuing pain for a cardiac episode); the adrenal glands release adrenaline and noradrenalin, revving the heart rate; when these chemicals flood the amygdala and hippocampus, anxiety peaks; the entire body craves oxygen, the intake of which minimizes carbon dioxide in the brain – hence, dizziness, vertigo, nausea and a host of other miseries; finally, we sweat profusely as we pant, a physical safety valve to cool ourselves off.

It’s the old fight or flight mechanism gone berserk and shifting out of synch with environmental reality. There is no saber-tooth tiger poised for attack, no Visigothic horde lined up like pickets on the horizon, no psychopath with a machete. Yet our minds and bodies react as if confronting a formidable enemy. Such vestigial responses to danger brutalize our systems; the ensuing “panic” is illusory. Well . . . the enemy is illusory, not the symptoms. (The proverbial wisdom of William James comes to mind: do we run because we’re afraid, or are we afraid because we run?)

I’ve followed the literature on panic attacks since I had my first one in 1991. I too rushed to the emergency room. I was lecturing in a university class when suddenly, ex nihilo, I grew overwhelmingly nauseous, broke out in sweat, thought I might pass out at any moment; my heart raced, the floor turned to gelatin. I gripped the podium for support as I sank into a miasma of confusion and befuddlement. The accompanying dread seemed tangible, a grotesquerie I had never before experienced, the invasion of some evil entity. I thought the ER was my only chance but doubted I would get there in time. I stammered “I feel sick” to the class and lurched out of the room.

They hooked me up to an EKG, affixed metal discs to my chest with wires sprouting forth like obscene serpents. I felt much calmer simply *being* in a hospital, despite my usual avoidance of such places. No heart attack, so they sent me off to the psychiatric wing. The medic on call asked a few questions, prescribed Ativan (lorazepam) and suggested a therapist. And thus began my delve into the labyrinth of behavioral, cognitive and pharmacological exorcism. But I was a bad patient. I resorted to psychotherapy only when terror peaked so hideously that I could not function, could not attend my classes, pump gasoline, take out the garbage, change a flat tire. Tete-a-tetes with counselors did not work for me, however soothing and necessary during the worst sieges. Secular priests, or perhaps neo-shamans, therapists will gently coax you out of jumping off a cliff.

It is indeed a fool's mission to attempt to diagnose one's self, and I played the fool for many a year, perusing the scant material I could find on panic. Only later did "panic attacks" officialize themselves with their entry into that bible of psychotherapy, the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders IV*, versions revised often since. What I learned, or think I learned, is that the nature of the malady is so Byzantinely interconnected that sufferers, almost by definition, must also grope with the seemingly isolated syndromes of clinical depression, anxiety disorder (in general), agoraphobia, obsessive-compulsive mania and a host of other maladies. No panic attack is an island entire unto itself. (I happened to be teaching Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* at some point along the line and recognized every symptom in Holden's descriptions of his own state of mind. It opened up the book to me in an entirely new way. Over half a century ago, long before we had even coined the term "panic attack," Holden was having them. After all, panic is nothing new. The ancients knew all about it – of which more soon.)

Over the years I have consulted enough therapists and psychiatrists– the drug people -- to know that depression and anxiety dance on opposite sides of the same coin. I have always been more prone to anxiety than depression, but, alas, the "ups" of anxiety can so thoroughly deplete your systemic energy that descent into depression is almost assured. You pass through the coin magically to the other side. The panic attacks themselves, or that first one anyway, warned me that I had burned my candle at both ends and needed to slow down . . . and when I didn't, the mind-body I knew as "me" collapsed. I crashed hard, and for a few months could hardly move – literally, physically. I recall lying on a mattress in a raunchy student apartment feeling hopeless, broken and deranged. The water pipes had frozen and bilge water seeped in all over the floor, surrounding and penetrating the sheetless mattress on which I lay flat on my back. A fitting decor to be sure. For an agonizing eternal moment, I believe I actually died. Death was a snap in the structure of spacetime, a light bulb burning out, the final note of a symphony. Not at all painful or scary. Mere release.

But like some creepy minor Lazarus, I returned. I began to divide my life into BD (before death) and AD (after death). AD, the "new" life, amounted to what we call "lagniappe" down in my hometown of New Orleans – a little extra, a freebie. Such morbid thinking had its advantages: I would never again fear death with the old urgency. It had already come and gone. I'd become residual to myself. There is an old existential notion about the would-be suicide who points a gun at his temple but then decides *not* to pull the trigger; the failed suicide, in this scheme, has indeed killed himself, albeit vicariously. The idea made sense to me at last. Suicide as dispensation.

I know exactly why I had the first and a few subsequent panic attacks. Genetic disposition towards "free floating anxiety" didn't help, but the attacks did seem to emerge *sui generis*, the eruption of personal

Vesuviuses after much tectonic, underground simmering. Think of that subterranean roil as the anxiety disorder, the eruption as a panic attack. (They feel like two entirely distinct beasts.) At the time I was involved in a long, ferocious custody battle which necessitated my rushing back and forth to New Orleans from Virginia to appear in court. My lawyers did nothing for me, so I fired them all and took the law into my own hands (another bad idea), filed my own motions, served as my own attorney. Life during those years dwindled into an OCD nightmare. It so happened that my ex-wife's lawyer had become his client's, let us say, "best friend" during the proceedings. This lawyer also played golf with the judge on Sunday mornings! I didn't have a chance, which was obvious to everyone but me. I seethed with rage over losing the five-year-old daughter I adored to such unethical, sleazy legal proceedings. I wrote letters of protest to the Bar Association. It's a club, don't bother. Not for one moment could I stop grieving over my legally abducted child. It wore me down. Thus that first panic attack while teaching a class back in Virginia after I had returned from still another round in Civil District Court (which is anything but civil).

But this story is about panic attacks, not my custody case. I have tried writing about the latter for many years but can't manage it. Some things we cannot write. I hope one day to set the record straight but feel no frenzy to do so after all this time. In fact, whenever I do think about those "legal" corruptions, even now, panic's barbed tendrils brush against whatever peace of mind I can manage. An abiding truth about panic attacks: once you have one, you always fear another. You become ritualistic, autistic, avoid anything associated with the Ur-onslaught. I will never again, for instance, lecture in a class while standing behind a podium. The image ignites chain reactions of mayhem in my mind. A panic attack is not simply the half hour or so of extreme symptomology; it also embraces the long hours, even days and weeks, afterward when memories of symptoms become auxiliary symptoms themselves, mnemonic echoes assailing you from a distance. For quite a while I could not go near crowded places - like classrooms or shopping malls, auditoriums, restaurants. The aftershock of agoraphobia kept me isolated, paranoid and vigilant. Those who know panic always park their cars close to the nearest emergency exit.

I have taken small doses of Ativan ever since, but during the initial weeks after that first ambush I found that chemistry alone had little value. The cataclysm requires a whole new approach to daily survival. I tried yoga and meditation, exercised as much as possible, spent time in the sun (D. H. Lawrence was right to call the sun a god we must worship), sought spiritual palliatives in every pigeonhole. For many years my friend Winston -- a fellow inductee into the zone of panic -- and I got involved in shamanic drumming, a native American trance-inducing technique. Make no mistake -- the therapeutics of panic are manifold and require religious harrowing. The BD "I" had been an atheist; the AD "I" found God. And for this treasure alone I thank panic profusely.

So allow me to propose a radically simple and alternative approach to the disorder. When we talk about medical/biological technicalities like noradrenalin, serotonin, the amygdala, the hippocampus . . . we reduce ourselves to what Walker Percy once described as "organisms in an environment." This is precisely what a purely scientific approach to any "mental" condition mandates: chemical imbalances in the brain. We are prescribed one benzodiazepine (notice the almost word "zodiac" almost sandwiched between the letters) or another and undergo various cognitive resurrection exercises during therapy sessions. But perhaps what we really need is a poetics of panic.

Any poetics is an aestheticization. Bachelard showed that just about everything could be poeticized. And this has nothing to do with writing poems. It is an alchemy that creates options, provides new levels of insight into phenomena, glimpses from another dimension. Similarly, to mythologize means to transmute subjects under scrutiny into archetypes in order to focus on the more elusive angles stashed in the multi-faceted trick bag of hermeneutics. I will use *poetics* and *mythologization* almost interchangeably here, though the first deals with beauty (images, symbols, aesthetics) and the latter, obviously, with symbolic alterations. A superb example of the latter is Ted Hughes's transfiguration of both himself and Sylvia Plath into mythic personae in that final book, *Birthday Letters*. Hughes constructed a poetics of both Plath's hysteria (forget psychotherapy, welcome demons) and his own. The Hughes and Plath of *Birthday Letters* transcend themselves as both historical figures and/or organisms in an environment; they function god-like in another realm. Call it insufferable egotism or call it redemption of a sort.

In this scenario Plath's electro-shock therapy translates as terrible yet sublime invasions by the god of revelation. Similarly, we can think of panic attacks as seizures by a god – and, in particular, the ancient Greek Pan, from whom we derive our word “panic.” Pan, in terms of historical record, seems a lightweight next to those formidable deities Deimos (god of fear, dread and terror) and Phobos (literally, the god of panic), but it is Pan who can teach us to re-evaluate our plights as organisms in an environment precisely because of his complexity. Deimos and Phobos function as potent abstractions, but Pan presides over shepherds, herdsman, animals, pastures, mountains, seemingly rustic, pastoral and easy-going folk and landscapes. He is, however, a satyr with the hind quarters and horns of a goat. (The medieval “devil,” still with us today, probably derives from this depiction of Pan, given those bestial features.) Pan's lechery is the stuff of legend. A formidable musician as well, from whom we derive the pan pipes. So where does panic fit into this bucolic *mise en scene*? Pan attacked those who wandered into the woods and took him by surprise; he returned the favor, leapt out from behind a bush or tree and in turn took the interlopers by greater surprise. Immediate, all-consuming dread, sometimes even unto death. Pan does not want to be disturbed and punishes those who dare intrude.

We could argue that Pan, half man/ half beast, is not unlike ourselves. When we respond with our old reptilian brains, we devolve to his level, the bestial self. Hence, Pan serves as a symbol or icon for every contemporary men and women. Fight or flight, the ancestral animal mechanism for dealing with stress, remains intact. Moreover, all accounts of the origin of tragedy claim its origins in primitive goat songs, which often involved sacrifice. John Barth wrote an entire novel spoofing the idea in *Giles Goat Boy*. Surely, we all agree that human existence is at least partially, if not entirely tragic. Somehow Pan fits in, what with those goat horns and buttocks. For is this not precisely our Pascalian predicament, our tragedy: neither angel nor beast, something midway perhaps, something wounded and doomed at birth?

Lechery? How does this erotic component relate to panic? The subject is massive, far beyond the purview of this foray, but consider, again, what Walker Percy had to say about the weird marriage of Eros and Thanatos. Percy contends that if the erotic component goes unfulfilled, death marches in regally in the form of war or suicide. Norman O. Brown makes similar points in *Love's Body* and elsewhere. As does just about any writer throughout history. I won't even mention Freud here. Thanatos is death, of course, not panic, but panic attacks evoke death and can be thought of as a kind of living, frantic death. The link is established. Eros, as antidote to Thanatos, must ceaselessly deploy. Perhaps Pan is horny all the time in order to evade himself. Make love, not war. (I'm not sure how all of this applies to women, who experience more panic attacks than men, for in some ways Pan can be viewed as personified testosterone.)

And Pan's flute? Sublime, by all accounts. He was good enough to challenge Apollo to a music duel. Apollo won but Pan ranked as a formidable contender. Here again we approach a subject so vast we can only nod in passing, i.e., the purpose and origin of music (or more pervasively, art in general). How does it relate to panic? Art as therapy, affliction as the sublimated fountainhead of art (Freud) . . . art as aestheticized, redirected Eros, art as futile yet noble artillery against Thanatos. Everything connects. The intertwinings are at once elusive and remarkably clear. Pan is both the limbic system (our first aid kit of serenity) and despoiler of the limbic system. Ativan (lorazepam) is a white powder compacted into one or two milligram pellets. Ativan strokes the limbic system, seat of emotions, where music and Eros reside.

If we dehumanize ourselves into defective organisms in an environment, machines in need of oil and repair . . . we lose sight of not only the magnificence of the universe but our own mystical, strange, wondrous presence in that universe. We roboticize ourselves into empty vessels, zombies, half comatose patients. We become, to cite Percy still again, anybodies anywhere. But if we indulge, permit ourselves a bit of grandiosity and flair, and regard panic attacks as the assaults of a god, Pan, we not only re-commune with nature but with the entire cosmic spectrum. Pan is a nature god, and, paradoxically, as a god, transcends nature. He has not disappeared; none of the gods have disappeared. Olympus (though Pan himself didn't live there) thrives in our primordial subconscious. This, yes, is the stuff of so-called "depth" psychology, the realms of Jung and his minions, and, today, James Hillman. And, yes, it has been hyped, popularized, cheapened, mass-manufactured. Anything at all can be popularized and cheapened – consider recent ventures into the Kabbalah by celebrities like Madonna, the manifold books and manuals instructing us to unleash the "gods" and "goddesses" within. Popularization, though, does not deplete the source or contaminate primal seed beds (rhapsodic works like *The Zohar*) just as popular accounts of quantum theory do not diminish the original equations of Planck, Bohr, Heisenberg, Schrodinger, Feynman.

So I advocate, if solely for its beauty, that those beset by panic think of themselves as *chosen*

by one of the sons of Zeus. We are not hapless victims with faulty wiring, bad chemistry; we have been seized by Pan and dwell in his abode. However haltingly, we walk with gods. And such treks lend at least a modicum of dignity to the otherwise random, grievous, anonymous ordeal of a panic attack. The old shamans, remember, were not elected to office by due process. Shamans were afflicted individuals, mentally or physically or both. Many were what psychiatry today would call "schizophrenics." But the shaman overcame his or her ailment, sought ritualistic tonics, ministered unto himself and cured himself and finally returned to the tribe as a healer. So may Pan's chosen return to their own tribe and offer healing advice and counsel. If I elevate those bludgeoned with panic, it is for the sake of balance in a society that consigns them the status of hapless, helpless patients at the mercy of the established norms and procedures of an objective-empirical medical establishment. It simply *feels* better to be singled out by a god rather than maimed for no other reason than the bad luck of faulty wiring.

This is not to degrade or belittle the medical establishment. It offers formidable weapons. I assume I'll be stuck on Ativan for the rest of my life. But, as I said earlier, Ativan alone, behavior modification alone, cognitive adjustment alone, do not suffice. Pan requires sacrifice – physical exercise, meditation, shamanic visions, the sun and, most importantly, acknowledgment. Maybe even a kind of begrudging love. After all, does not the Christian god make similar demands? Don't forget Job and Abraham. One more suggestion and I'm done. Those who struggle with panic, or any other mental problem, should

consult Ernest Becker's splendid essay, "Angel in Armor." Becker makes a grand case for the poetics of paranoia in particular, paranoia as a means to greater insight, illumination, transcendence and spiritual attainment. Substitute panic for paranoia and not much changes. Panic is nothing if not a super-charged state of paranoia, lasting perhaps half an hour at most at its apex; the paranoia then dwindles but remains resonating in the background forever. Unless you are one of the lucky ones who manage to wriggle out of the talons altogether. The friend I spoke of earlier has so escaped, intact, through the agency of organized religion. At one point he found himself stranded in a Texas desert, Pan reducing him to his knees in almost total body paralysis. He thrust himself into the hands of a greater deity and has eluded Pan ever since. This is all, obviously, a matter for and of the gods. Panic, that prolonged dark night of the soul, batters us with the sacred - perhaps, for some of us, the only way back. Call it low serotonin intake if you like, but I prefer to think that Pan *is* low serotonin intake. What's in a name?

*Bill Wolak*

*Loves Inimitable Attraction*



## *Jacob Wrestles the Alien*

A thunderous boom—and then the sound undulated over the hills; with it, an explosion of opaque light blanketed the landscape. The peculiar noise, like a pitchy bomb, or underwater trainwreck, unfolded and stretched away from a blinding locus, a cosmic rupture high above the unincorporated hamlet of Derby, Ireland. This sound was so beyond loud that it remained constant maybe five miles out; only beyond that radius, at the edge of the land, around where the cliffs met the sea, did it even begin to dissipate—almost as if the noise were swallowed by the waves.

The sheer energy released by the phenomenon also shattered all the windows—finely garnished as they were—that flanked the cottage belonging to the widow Ms. O’Shea, who, subsequently possessed by a spell of terror, leaped from her bed howling about the apocalypse. In this sudden fit the rotund, fifty-something woman grabbed the nearest frying pan and dashed out the door in her pink nightie and matching hair net, continuing to scream as she blazed through the countryside.

Now, three people belonged to this little locality; each home was spaced more or less several hundred meters from any other by a long, curving stretch of unpaved road, laid with a fine white gravel that stood out against the rolling green. I could continue on about the life and livelihood of Ms. O’Shea, but she effectively removed herself from this story once she made it over the hill and that greenery; if one were to have stood by her cottage, looking out at her as she ran, she would’ve looked a little pink ball, flailing and jostling as she approached the horizon, quickly dissolving against the backdrop of the golden Atlantic, all splattered with sunlight.

In any case, there were the other two:

On the far end of “town,” opposite the home of the yet-raving and long-gone widow, was the empty cabin belonging to one wealthy Morgan Dowers. A successful attorney from Vancouver, Dowers traveled much and often, and only came to his remote cabin when in need of solitude. As the man was away, no one knew or noticed when the volcanic clap rended the ground beneath his home in two, the floor collapsing into the fault...

And yet, further south, the damage was even worse:

When the sky roared that day it roared and fissured directly above the tiny house of old Mr. Jacob Nass. An all-encompassing light pierced the atmosphere like something from a dream, or a cosmic mechanism imagined a thousand years hence. An ominous beam born from the far reaches of the universe, issuing a massive sonic blast, it disintegrated old Nass’s ceramic-tiled roof, the remainder a scattering of scorched stone flung skyward. Luckily for Nass his hearing had lately been failing, so he just remained sound asleep, snoring and groaning through all of it. Thick, black smoke rose from the ashen beams and supports, but Nass simply went on grunting and tumbling in deep slumber.

Not a minute later, after the light had died down and the debris had begun to clear from the sky, a large mass could be seen descending from the clouds, heading directly for the grassy hillock atop which the old man’s cottage was placed. The fast-moving vehicle was distinctly spherical, chrome, and consisted of an array of colorful flashing lights and panels ordered in impossible streaming patterns rotating around

vast, hyper-spatial, gyroscopic constructs and a glowing, pulsating, heavenly blue nexus tucked away in a chamber of clockwork brilliance and alien strangeness.

As the otherworldly orb closed in on its landing point the powerful exhaust system located on its dorsal—far more advanced than anything seen on Earth—produced a burnt engraving in the ground, an expanding wound that utterly vaporized the soil and foliage upon closer approach. Then, suddenly, the engines stopped, and the giant ball free-fell the last few dozen meters of its descent until finally, with a quaking impact, it cratered into Mr. Nass's front lawn, destroying his precious begonias.

Upon contact the earth seized up, and the old man's yard flung itself into the small facade of his cottage, sending a vertical crack up the pinewood porch door. In Nass's bedroom various chotchkies and knickknacks, vases and picture frames fell to the floor and shattered, and he—old Jacob—just turned over on his pillow, coughed, mumbled something barely intelligible about how, "Eileen's going to put me up in the old folks home in Bray," and kept up his slumber.

Once snug and unassuming, the house now looked as if it had been firebombed.

Meanwhile, just outside, steam was exuding from holes and seams in the hydraulic doors of the metallic mass, creating a deep, protracted, droning tone. The sound was akin to twenty elephants sighing in unison, or like a whale snoring inside a cathedral.

In any case, there it sat—the thing. For the sake of perspective, the whole structure was more or less four times the size of Nass's humble home, a mud-hut by comparison.

As the entrance to the exotic craft folded open, a bedazzling ray of light shot through the growing exit, casting a pearly luminescence through the fresh crack in the cabin door.

The last wisps of steam dissolving in the cool morning air, out stepped a being of bewildering complexity, shining a burning pale blue and green, half-organic, half-mechanical, a cybernetic bio-digital perfection radiating glory and awe.

In the light of the day one could see it more clearly: It was shaped like a man—a naked man—quite tall, and chiseled and handsome by most standards, though its skin consisted of some sort of bluish, silvery metal. (Or what appeared to be metal.) The finer details of its form were impossible to discern, however, due to the light incessantly pouring from its body.

"Beings of Earth!" it cried in a thunderous, androgynous voice worthy of some extra-worldly archon, "I have come to learn, and to bring great benefit to your planet!"

This proclamation was what, in fact, finally roused the old man, who came to snorting and coughing and darting his cataracting gaze, saying, "What? Who?!"

Startled, old Nass sat up and rubbed his eyes and face. He yawned and scratched his balding head and with his frail right hand matted down his white, wispy hair. Rising from his bed, Jacob Nass was a visibly squalid character, hunched over a little and bearing a large paunch. Varicose and spider veins ran through his ghostly flesh, dotted with liver spots and warts and various other blemishes. His socks and briefs hung, having lost their elasticity long ago. From the side one could view a saggy testicle drooping out from a leg

on the latter. He scratched his deflated buttock and walked over to the restroom, turning on the faucet to wash his face, as he did every morning. The water flowed for a few seconds and then sputtered out as the tap went dry.

“Gawd damn fockin’ pipes!” he grumbled. “Ah, well, got tuh git tuh the hardware store anyhow. Eh...”

Nass proceeded back to the bedroom, where he slowly dressed himself, putting on his typical outfit: old cotton slacks and a beige button-down with a short overcoat, topped off with his father’s worn bowler hat. After tying his shoes and fixing his collar, he began shuffling his way to the kitchen, which was a few feet away from the bedroom.

Suddenly then, as he reached the threshold of room, he heard it: a loud bang on the door, and with it a swelling echo from off the lower register... an ominous tone that was, until now, completely unfamiliar to him. It was so strange, in fact, this residual noise, that before properly recognizing that he had a visitor he just stood still, cocking his head, paralyzed in that moment by the perplexity of what—at least he imagined—he had just heard. Blinking, shifting his gaze to the door, he did a double take before grumbling and tottering over, passing through the kitchen and into the front entryway. But as soon as he was a mere foot from the door he staggered back, a blinding alien light piercing the entrance through the fresh, splintered crack.

“Damn the sun!” He cried, shielding his eyes. “And damn the carpenter, tuh!” Nass squinted as he put his hand to the handle of the door. Jarring it open, he said to himself, “Got tuh do everythin’ yurself nowadays!” before allowing the full radiance of the impossibility happening outside to pass into his normally-dim cottage. The light was so utterly glorious that he fell backwards, knocking his hat off on the counter and landing on his mangled back, overwhelmed.

The being stepped into the doorframe, and spoke with the power and authority of the hosts of heaven: “I am here to provide to you, leader of Earth, the bliss and power of the masterful beings of this universe. I am here to make the human species anew, to make you all into gods! One with that Supremacy! To bring you total and irrevocable illumination beyond all conception!”

“I don’t like Mormons!” cried squalid Nass from the dusty floor. The being offered him his transcendent hand, an unworldly jeweled apparatus of hyperspatial light, and somewhat reluctantly, albeit amazed, the old man grasped it and was quickly pulled to his feet. As the alien shook his hand—with, I might add, a perfectly firm grasp, not too hot or cold—Nass almost felt as if he was witnessing the birth of the universe, only to disregard the thought as the result of forgetting to take his fish oil pills the day prior.

So the old man blinked and scrutinized the bizarre entity from mystical head to interdimensional toe, a perplexed but aggravated grin plastered between his sagging dimples. “Yu’rr a Jehovah’s Witness, aren’t ya?” he asked. “I can’t see tuh well these days, just so ya understan’ that.”

“Friend, I am a consciousness beyond the confines of characteristic: word, name, or any other such conception.”

“Humble tuh!” retorted Nass, waving away the statement. He carefully fitted his father’s black hat back on his warted skull.

“If it helps you to address me by name, you may utilize the title I have been given by the djinn of Zartos 52-b in my third passing through the Eagle Nebula.” Nass continued to stare with a contorted countenance, impatient, openly aggravated at all the brightness. “The translation thereof is that of Æ’In-Djehutt. I have also been known as the Thoth of Proxima Centauri, and in the Molorkian tongue as Madakh-ich-na’Katz medLEzhuk nUboor morok-kamanan tebraggiq’oSos meZud-alak Barren... These are both honoraries that I am exceedingly grateful to have been bestowed with.”

“Well now, that’s all very nice and I’s...” started Nass, “I’s so sure yurr parents loved ya.” He blinked wildly. The alien stood in silence, seemingly perplexed.

“What do ya want, then?” asked Nass.

“I meet you today, first and foremost, to acquaint myself with you, your gracious highness, god-king of Terra, regent of the sentient life of the third body, Sol C.” The thing made a deep bow at Nass, and then returned to its upright position. Nass didn’t react. “I am, secondly, according to my superior, to learn the methods and manners of your peoples and the habits of the remaining species’ of the surface biosphere, in order that I may confer to you the enlightenment of my race.”

The human placed his hands on his hips, snorted up a fat loogie and spat it onto the cracked, crumbled porch. He sniffed the air, full of the scent of smoldering concrete and mineral wool.

“What’s cookin’ out here?” He queried. “Ah,” he shrugged it off, “never mind that, anyhow! Just come inside and we’ll get this over with.”

He hobbled back to his kitchen, the Buddhic entity following in his footsteps.

“Sit,” he commanded. The alien hesitated for a moment, and then began to place its pearlescent ultimatum asscheeks on the chipped wooden stool before it, but before quite making it Nass hollered, “No, not *that* one! Jeezus fock! That’s the *nice* one. Over here please!” Nass pointed to the sink.

“Human sir,” the alien replied, “the object to which you have pointed is, as I understand from my prescient knowledge and admittedly limited comprehension of your species, a receptacle for dihydrogen oxide—water—disposal. I believe you refer to it, in that tongue prevalent in the occident, as a ‘sink’. Archaisms include ‘wash basin,’ ‘lavabo,’ and—”

Nass grumbled and rubbed his face with both hands. “Mah eyes! Mah eyes, I told ya!” he interrupted.

The entity remained silent, then moved to the adjacent side of the table and placed itself in a larger, cushioned arm chair. Nass made his way to the stool and sat down.

“I remember this being softer,” he noted, and coughed heavily, clearing his throat of a yellowish mass. The alien seemed unamused, light pouring from its orifices and illuminating Nass’s heavy wrinkles and the pockmarks and blackheads that littered his nose. “So what’s yurr banter?” asked the old man. “Be quick, by Gawd.”

“I reiterate, your grace: I am bound by my duty as cosmic emissary to exchange knowledge, receiving important data regarding the lifeforms of the various planets in this arm of the galaxy, and as a kind

of payment, I suppose you might call it, to elevate sentient beings, wherever I may encounter them, to the heights of my own being, and the heights of my species. You may describe this as a socio-cognitive revolution, or in your case post-human utopia, though I must admit that those terms are merely provisional, as it is impossible to truly comprehend this state at your current level of awareness.”

Nass leaned forward. “Are ya... are ya callin’ me *retarded*?” he asked, his eyes squinted. He appeared more than slightly cross.

“No, no,” replied the alien. “I am not speaking of your ability to locomote, to come hither or thither at such and such speeds. My species, of course, has no use for limbs as you humans do. I have merely adopted this hominid form, as I had assumed it would better please your majesty’s sensibilities.” It was clear the being misunderstood the man.

“But what yu’rr sayin’ is I’s *stupid*... yeah?” Nass asked, now noticeably, and unnecessarily, offended.

“No!” cried the alien, somewhat disconcerted. “Not at all, mister Secretary-General. Not at all.” It was apologetic now. “I—”

“What did ya call me?” asked Nass, interrupting. He shook his head, appearing confused.

“Secretary-General. Leader and god-king of Earth.”

“Now, I’s no such thing!” Nass responded. “I’s better than that!”

“Oh... I see,” replied the alien. “Perhaps I was given the wrong title of office.”

“Clearly,” said Nass. “I owned a men’s clothin’ store down in Galway for some years, then, when mah wife died, I closed the shop. Had a stint cleanin’ toilets after that. In a school. I’s retired now, as ya can plainly see.”

“Listen,” the alien said, leaning in toward the man. “I am to make you and your peoples anew.” Nass stared coldly at it. “All told, this is a relatively simple process in which several million yottabytes of data are meted out, in collapsible virtual files, using sub-quantum computers fueled by an unstable isotope of ununoctium siphoned from a seventh-dimensional plane.”

“Let’s have some coffee first,” grumbled Nass, getting up and walking to the cupboard. “Then ya can sell me yurr fuckin’ magazine.” He sifted through the contents of his cabinet and produced a rusty tin can full of dark grounds. “Ya like it black?”

“My sapient friend, I—”

“Speak up!” yelled the old man.

“My race has evolved to the point of no longer requiring sustenance from animal or vegetable sources. I have neither internal tissues nor a digestive tract. I am merely made of unspeakable awakened energy. I would explain further but—”

“Black it is!”

After all was said and done with, Nass sat back down, two steaming cups in his hands. He placed one before the Nirvanic intelligence.

“I still smell that,” proclaimed Nass, sniffing again as more black smoke curled up from the bottom of the walls. “That stupid woman—she lives past the hill—I say she’s making porridge again. I tell her, “No one wants it, Miriam!” But she keeps making shit for me to eat. *Shitty* porridge. Brings it over in the evenings in plastic tubs, or even bags. Sets it on my porch when I’s away in the city. *Fock*. She’s been that way since her husband croaked, ya know. No loss, no, not one. He cheated me out of fifty pounds. It was in 1978. That asinine—” Jacob grumbled, folded his hands over the table and coughed again. “It used to be pounds, anyways. Now we got *euros*. Bullshite, if you ask me.” He paused before insisting that the illumined creature adjacent to him get on with his sales pitch.

“I would, first of all, very much like to know by what name you identify this locality.”

“Ah, yeah, yes, hmmm,” Nass began, leaning in toward his guest, “and I suppose ya want the shirt off mah back, and maybe mah birth certificate—maybe mah ballz on a platter, tuh, yes?” The alien did not reply. “Ya fockin’ salesmen are cronies for the government, anyway. *Bureaucrats*. Need tuh know everythin’ about a man if he’d do a damn thing these days.” Still, the being did not reply.

“—What d’ya mean, then? Did ya not see the sign? This is Derby, ya dimwit! Derrr-beeee” Nass pointed towards the opening that had previously been occupied by the window. “It says so right over the gate. Bum fock nowhere. Nothin’ tuh see! *No-thin’ tuh seeee!* Nothin’ goes on here or ever has! And yet, *yu’rr* here!”

“Ah!” the being was roused, “I was under the impression that the base of all politico-philosophical dissemination was the grand temple which you have deemed the, I believe, “Nations United Bastion,” located within a hazed urban corridor north of the great ancient land of one Stygian “New Jersey,” which, as I have come to learn, is part of the larger kingdom of the “Ameri-ka.””

Nass, with one truly functioning eye, stared blankly into the open, endless gaze of the alien, his mouth hanging a little slack-jaw as he heaved and sniffled, then shrugged and pulled his mug to his lips, taking an obnoxious, protracted gulp.

“Ya know,” said Nass, “Irishmen don’t normally take to drinkin’ coffee. We’s more interested in *tay* typically. But yu’rr from some other country, I can plainly see. Lest yu’rr an Englishman yu’d probably be against drinkin’ *tay*. You’re an American, hm?”

“If you mean conception, then I originated from outside this galaxy. My gestative stage occurred when my birthing-pod entered the space between the few planets surrounding 24 Sextantis.”

“So yurr a *polack!*” cried Nass.

“No. Not at all,” replied the alien.

A short silence fell between them again.

“I had assumed,” stated the being, breaking the pause, and looking up to the sky through the open ceiling, “that an illustrious empire was where I had made my descent. My coordinates should have been correct. We

have been studying your planet for nearly sixty-five millennia now. Yet even in our advanced state of post-neurological bliss, residing thirty-million light years away does make some calculations difficult. I should admit to the nature of that fault. No doubt, I will recalibrate after you return with me to the orbital station. The celestial gate has been placed in the lagrange point between the ternary stars of Epsilon Volantis.”

“Well,” retorted Nass, between slurps, “ya *just* had tuh take a left on the last intersection. Get off on the ramp. It’s a gravel road, but it ain’t misleadin’. There should’ve been a sign at the fork.”

Then a longer silence followed, punctuated only by the soft hum of the mere presence of the enlightened creature, as well as Nass’s continual snorts and gulps and farts.

“Ya know,” said the man, ending the virtual quiet, “nobody drinks coffee here... nobody ‘cept me... it’s always *tay*... always...” he trailed off, drooling a bit. Having effectively reiterated himself, Nass’s senility clearly showed, though the alien, despite its knowledge and wisdom, did not appreciate that fact. Meanwhile, there was a weird drone in the air—the loudening sound of flames melting the insulation between the walls. Overhead the sun shone brightly, and it shone brighter still as a large section of that cheap panelling, one of the last remnants of the kitchen, fell to the ground beside the two beings. A plume of dust wafted upward, and then some minutes later dissipated. Through the soot and smoke and dirt a white-breasted swallow could be seen fluttering just outside.

“Ok!” yelled the man. Having finished his drink, he slammed his empty cup on the table and slowly rose from his stool. “I guess by all rights I ought tuh give ya a tour... the *grand tour*. Ya seem tuh have decided yu’ll stay, then? Just invite yurself in, ya? Here... come with me.” Nass beckoned his guest to trail him across the kitchen and into the bedroom. The alien followed suit. Yet as they reached the doorframe a large stream of smoke came billowing through, causing Nass to cough and grasp his chest.

“Gawd dammit! That’s just *terrible* soup, isn’t it?!” Tears streamed from Nass’s eyes. He spit up a blackish gob and continued to the bedroom.

“This is where you enter cognitive reconstitution?” asked the alien, observing the ruins.

“No.”

“Restitution?”

“This is where I plan tuh die.”

“Aging became obsolete in my galaxy.”

“Ya work for Avon?”

“I—”

“I do need a new toothbrush.”

“Sir—”

“Let’s go have a look at the garden.”

“Very well. I am interested in observing the flora of—”

“This way please!”

The alien accompanied Jacob to his little garden: They proceeded through a sliding door and came out to a bed of plants growing along the back of the house.

“Ya see,” said Nass, pointing to a patch of gardenias, “this is where I keep mah tomatoes. It’s a raised bed. It helps the soil drain. I grind up eggshells and mix them with the dirt.” He then hobbled over to a pot full of dead leeks. “And these are the tiger lillies,” he said.

“If I am not mistaken, those—”

“Don’t interrupt me!” interrupted Nass. “I haven’t even showed ya the rosebed!” The man wandered to the edge of the plot and stood, with his back to the being, by a broken picket in the fencing, now overtaken with vines. “Fockin’ meatheads,” he mumbled to himself.

The alien replied: “My race evolved close to the rotational center of the galaxy, in Ophiucus. We have since expanded to the far reaches of your observable sphere, even to EGS-zs8-1.”

“I don’t care where yu’rr from. Ya could be Hawai’ian for all I care. I just want to git’cha out of mah house, yeah? Ya understan’?” Nass turned around and faced the creature. “I am old, and as an old man I can tell ya I’ve had enough *bullshite* in mah life. Were I younger, tuh, I’d’ve socked ya in the gut ‘soon as ya came tuh the door. But, for a polack, you’re a stout one. (I do respect that.) I know when tuh pick mah battles, though I was reckless in mah youth. Yes! I was quite the pugilist back in Cork!” Nass shoved his frail fists in the air, grinned and grunted, and punched lightly in the direction of the alien. Then he laughed and began panting and slapped his knees.

“I admit,” said the alien, “that we may be at some impasse. I expected quite a different encounter from the Emperor of the Earthen Collective. Your culture baffles me, sir, and I find it standoffish, and also strangely elusive. Perhaps you humans are more nuanced creatures than my race has assumed. We have long thought ourselves the archivists of the cosmos, travelling far through the universe transmitting pristine awareness, true utopia, and near-limitless knowledge. But you, my friend, have humbled me with your arcane wisdom. I wish to learn more. Sincerely! And I have much to offer in return, if you would but accompany me to the rendezvous outpost. There, the city of 78-Forseti awaits as a luminous bastion on the cold reaches of the artificial moon which circles OTS 44. Through the cosmic gate we may reach it in a matter of what you know as hours—or days, should the Alcubierre drive need minute repairs.”

Nass stood there, scratching his stubbly chin, then picked at a scab on his neck. “What’s in it for me?” he asked.

The alien approached Nass, and came so close to him that they now stood no more than a few inches apart. “I am uncertain as to how I might reiterate,” began the being. “Though, as I have uploaded the entirety of your world’s languages to my local drive, I am confident I can make a proper effort...

“I have travelled a billion parsecs to meet you here, and with utmost respect I must say that while I am tantalized by your culture, as well as your dedication to invisible plantlife, I am frustrated by your lack of

interest in my proposition. No sentient species, of the thousands we have encountered, has yet resisted the facilitation of utopia. It is within our power to not only halt your current state of climatic disruption, but to reverse it, and in fact program your planet in such a way that yields of biomass may increase sixfold. All the same, we may re-engineer your biome so as to require only stellar energy—the force of interstellar yotta-waves—for sustenance, and as such a lack of food would be rendered an obsolete concern. We can transfer eons of information to every brain in Orion-Cygnus, and in a matter of milliseconds. We have mastered telepathy, teleportation, quantum tunneling, interdimensional power siphoning, post-light travel, and we provide on our home planet alone over fifty-six two-way wormholes into yet unexplored dimensions of extraordinary chaos and beauty. We are on the frontiers of a new, truly limitless knowledge, even a kind beyond our own “infinity”...

“Sounds like horseshite tuh me,” said Nass. “Ya’d think we’d be safe from crazy religious freaks like ya here. Ah, well, I could smell ya holy rollers from halfway tuh Kinsale. ‘Least I knew who ya was.”

“My kin have no stake in particular timelines or separate realities, or to the metaphysics which govern them. We travel freely between the planes on our astral fortresses, and study without prejudice the paradigms of their endemic races, merely sentient or supremely enlightened.”

“Now, what d’y mean, *en... light... ened?*” The man struggled with that last word.

Light shone forth from the alien’s open mouth as it prepared to make a reply, but before it could speak, a curdling scream made interrupted their conversation, distracting the both of them. They looked to the west, past what had once been a verdant and well-manicured backyard, in the direction from which the sound came.

“Nass! “Naaaass!”” the voice cried. “Nass!” It grew closer and louder with each subsequent “Nass!”

“Oh shite in heaven, not him!” exclaimed Nass. “It’s the fockin’ *leaf!*”

“My neural net indicates to me that you are referring to a Canadian,” said the alien, placing a glowing finger on its temple.

“Nass!” the voice grew louder. “Nass, you sonofabitch! I’m going to rip your goddamn head off!”

“Jeezus and Jozeff in the sky!” Cried Jacob Nass, his dread apparent.

Up came Morgan Dowers, resident Vancouverite, his face flushed red, showing anger and shock.

“Nass! You shit! You destroyed my house!” yelled Dowers, tears streaming down his cheeks. “What the fuck!” he shouted, flailing his arms.

“Now wait a minute,” said Nass, holding up his hands and backing away from the approaching businessman.

“Human, please release your weapon!” yelled the alien, noticing a revolver in Dowers’ left hand as he made his way closer to Nass, coming up the hill. “Human, cease at once! You may not harm the emperor of Earth!” Dowers, in his anger, did not seem to hear the being’s command. Or, rather, he simply tuned it out.

“And where’s Catherine? Where’s Cathy O’Sh—” Dowers stopped himself mid-sentence. The attorney now had the alien in full view. He gasped audibly. His eyes widened and his mouth gaped. Before him, just a few meters away, stood the radiant being, bluish-white light flaming from its form and arcs of plasma diving in and out of its body. To Dowers it was impossible to describe the creature due to the sheer level of complexity every element of its appearance exhibited. To Dowers, who had scarcely witnessed anything more awe-inspiring than a private beach, or a line of cocaine at a cocktail party, this magnificence was simply incomprehensible.

“Stop immediately!” demanded the alien of Dowers. But in his state of fear and awe, Dowers had no idea what to do.

Stupidly, he rose his arm and pointed the gun at the alien as he slowly began to back away.

“Wha-what are you?” asked Dowers. “Are you real?” He looked to Jacob Nass. “Nass, what’s going on?” he queried the man, trembling.

“Put down the weapon or you will be destroyed,” warned the alien.

“N-no! Fuck you!” yelled Dowers. He squeezed the trigger of his revolver and a bullet went straight through the alien, who unflinchingly took the shot as if it were nothing at all.

“Goodbye,” said the alien as it raised its arm and pointed its finger at Dowers. The being changed color: Instead of the usual blue, it glowed a striking crimson red.

Then, suddenly, Dowers exploded. The blast knocked Nass to the ground and covered him, the alien, the garden, and the side of his house in gore.

The alien faded back to blue, turned toward Jacob Nass, and stared down at him.

Nass just continued to lay there, stupefied and, despite his stoicism, even *disgusted*. He’d seen a man shot—sure—when he went out hunting pheasant with his father and his uncle Benny; his dad, trying to plug a bird, slipped and caught Benny with a slug in his right thigh. Nass recalled in that moment how his uncle bled—how, while screaming a litany of nasty profanities, he jerked about on the woodland ground, with each movement forcing more thick, dark blood out of the hole in his leg. It gushed and gushed out of that hole, and later on it simply *oozed*. At the time, Jacob, having had a child’s mind, imagined that grizzly opening, pulsing and leaking as it was, was, somehow, a doorway to Hell.

He’d seen a man shot—sure—but not *exploded*.

So Nass just laid there, staring up at a thick layer of clouds. He tried to make sense of what he’d just witnessed, as if it were somehow impossible. *In fact*, he thought to himself, *it surely is impossible*. He questioned the logic of it, though he still thought nothing of the fact that beside him, looking down at him, was an almost certainly more impossible thing—a living god, effectively.

The “god” in question approached Nass. It bent over him and offered him its hand.

“May I help you?” the being asked.

“No... no,” said Nass, almost gently, almost whispering, still staring listlessly up at the clouds.

“Are you sure?” it asked.

“Yea,” replied Nass catatonically.

“Alright,” said the being. It stood back up. “I sense you are experiencing some sort of surprise. I understand you must lie down in order that you might better analyze the emotion.”

“Yep,” said Nass.

“I will now bid you and your planet farewell,” said the alien. This caught Nass by surprise.

“Wait. *What?*” asked Nass, getting off the ground and brushing the dust off his clothes. “I still haven’t shown you the water closet.” Nass pointed to the smoldering remains of his house.

“I have clearly misapprehended humanity,” replied the being. “You are an unreasonable species, governed by a stubborn and short-sighted man. Your unreasonableness lead to violence. As emperor of this planet you really should have a more robust security system—decent protection—yet instead you live in squalor, in a burning ruin that is open to all the elements. I have difficulty understanding this.”

“I told ya—” started Nass, hobbling over to the alien. He panted on his way. “I told ya I don’t like Jehovah’s Witnesses. *Or* pyramid schemes!”

“I understand your cynicism,” replied the alien. “But I represent none of the things you fear.”

“Get out of my fuckin’ face, you shite.” Nass turned to his house and raised his arms. “Look!” he cried. “Look at all the shite I gotta clean up!” He pointed to the flesh splattered on one of the remaining walls.

“I did what was necessary to protect you,” said the alien. “Negative side effects were inevitable.”

“You look at this!” shouted Nass, still pointing. “It’s like somebody took a fat shite on my wall and my begonias! By Gawd, I’ll be dead if I get another visit from you magazine salesmen!”

“Farewell, sir,” said the alien. It bowed to Nass. Then it turned away from him and walked to its ship—the sphere—which began to glow as the creature approached it.

The hydraulic doors of the craft opened and light poured from the entrance. Jacob Nass shielded his eyes but still caught a glimpse of the being as it entered its craft.

The ball, alight with impossible colors and giving off a blinding brightness, rose from the ground as the jets on its bottom seared the earth in front of Nass's house once again. The entrance to the ship closed, and then it rose further into the air. Then, in a flash, it was gone. All Nass could see of it was a dissolving speck against the pale sky above. Then, after a minute, the speck itself disappeared, and Nass, angered by the events of the past several hours, grumbled and swore under his breath.

He hobbled back into his house and over to his bed. He took off his shoes and laid down.

"I hate Mormons," he said.

<sup>1</sup>*Discrimination against Mormons and others belongs to the character, not to the author or to Aji.*

## *Almost Five Months*

Almost five months  
since your kidneys  
strangled you, since they left you

without nerve or heat, left  
you green after a decomposing  
week. Five months since you

were declared yourself  
by the man from the examiner's  
office after inspecting your

ghostly face and comparing it  
with your license. Almost  
five months to rearrange

my resentments, to stifle my strange  
sense that you had never gone,  
that a hoax had floated itself

over the tops of the suspension  
bridges in the San Francisco Bay,  
that you would be calling

with some new joke or laughing  
at some old foible. Five months to forget  
my sense that anyone

might still steer into your kind  
ravages, your splintering  
wit, your caustic assessments,

that anyone of your old  
boy gang wanted to take you out  
for sirloin and vintage reds.

Almost five months  
to suppress my notion  
that anyone might notice

that your end was bloodless,  
a small spider curling  
itself into a shrivel

while all the dead flies  
bounced in their nets,  
awaiting the fog.

## *Bangladesh Factory Collapse*

Hurry the fused tints, the shielded cracks, the durability of ramshackle.  
Hurry the spiritual health of jerry-built, the silence at the center.  
How do you anthologize the garlands of gas lamp skulls,  
The cricket galaxies of machined thigh bones and laparoscopy's profits,  
The decisions that stripped the beauty marks from their saturated obedience?  
Even the inspectors have fallen into the maelstrom,  
Have morphed into blood carpets and welcome mats of gristle.  
Knitting machines counting out their missals of ordinary time.  
Hands that tied tiny knots now lace into advent wreaths of two-dimensional arteries.  
There is something coming, something less and less,  
Something, an identity lost in its grip on the transparency of collapse.  
Three hundred, four hundred religions stammering through their punctured large intestines.  
A baptism of drywall dust and unreinforced masonry.  
Reading the quarterly reports into which seven devils have been cast.  
The devils that passed through the wire mesh of a dying minimum ratio.  
The different floors for different factories now embellish their own enlightenment.  
Their staffs have banished their own carefulness, have foreclosed their robustness,  
Have rendered into so many clichés the suffering which is ubiquitous,  
The suffering inspired by capital martyring its surplus value.  
Outdoors, they are handling the rubble like reluctant thieves.  
They are handling the shorn bodies like a barber with his leather strop,  
Presenting the sari-marvelous survivors like auctioneers might a rare brocade.  
The civic authorities have broadcast a curfew  
When the beleaguered building owners are detained with cancelled rent checks at the border,  
When the divested manufacturer seeks out more discretion for tomorrow's pinched currencies  
And expendable labor's protests abandon pure analysis,  
And rage turns pipeline instead of atomizer, turns frontloader instead of prybar.

## *For My Brother Walter on the Fortieth Anniversary of His Death*

Our grandfather grumbled,  
“No respect for the dead!”  
at your friends who’d driven all night  
and, disheveled in down jackets,  
read the lessons at your funeral.

In the longhand of your death,  
all the grumbles convene  
into trampled detours, into solitary  
barn swallows that swoop and settle  
in a black tree that buds before  
the frost danger has abated.

Your lusts have all rolled up,  
all broken into small beads of mercury  
from fractured thermometers  
in jettisoned weather stations.

I would not look when the undertaker  
lifted the lid of your packing crate coffin  
to show us how he’d brushed your hair.  
I turned away before our brother  
fitted your harmonica holder  
at the nape of your neck. Your neck

would never flex  
around your voicebox again.  
Your hand would never again unloose  
the grip of the American Tourister  
suitcase you abandoned  
at the nadir of lowtide  
the day it was too cold  
to drown.

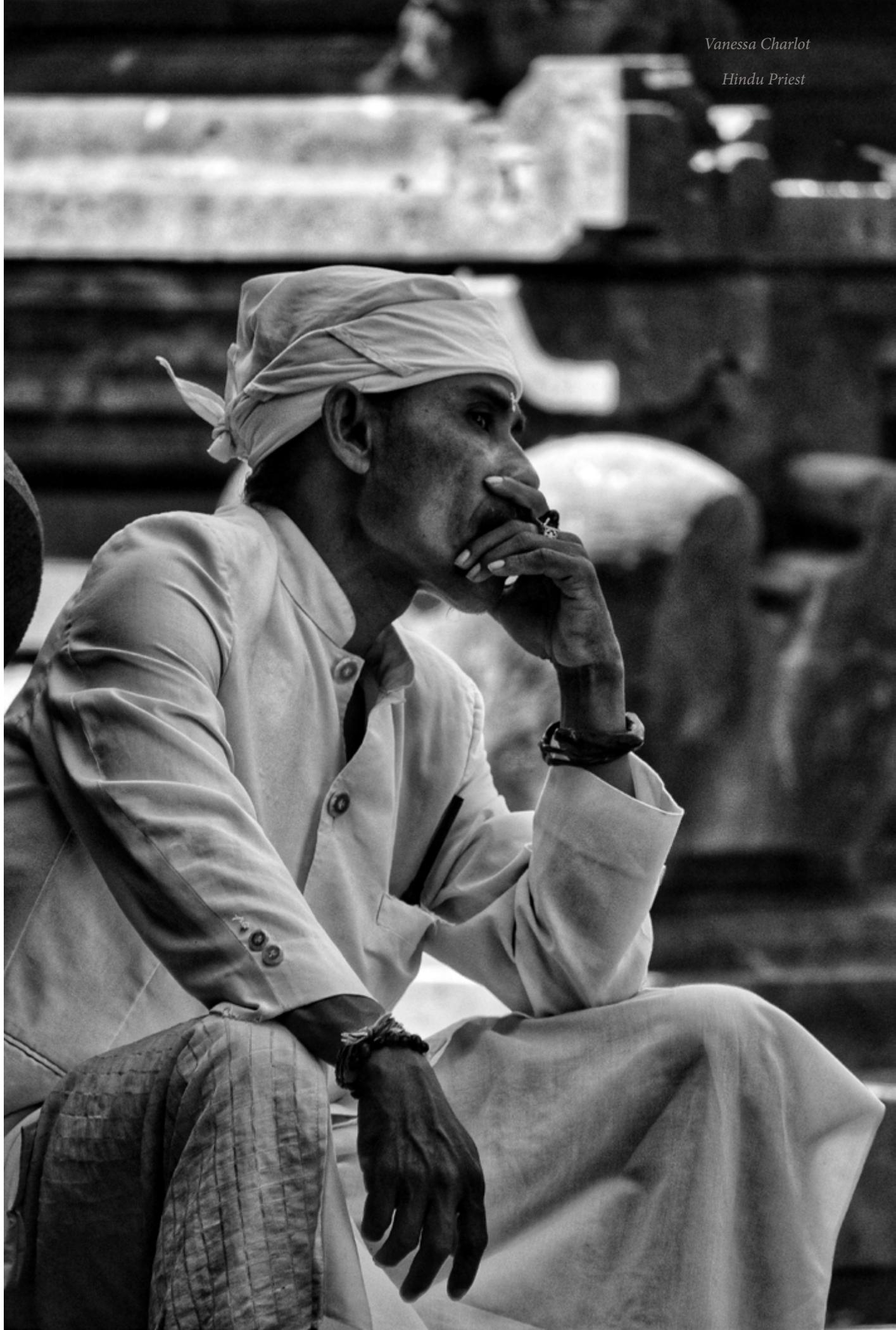
Now, every summer, the suitcase  
floats its way ashore. The kids who find it  
snap the hasps, scan the pages  
from your last agonized journal  
you tucked inside with a toothbrush,  
your blue, bristling griefs smeared  
and blotted, more heartbroken  
and more indecipherable  
with every passing year.

## *Invisibilizer*

You may be interested to learn  
That I have just completed work  
On the world's first  
Sub-morphologic, pre-molecular  
Invisiblizer (SMPMI)  
A revolutionary device  
That can render solid objects  
Into mere whims  
And passing fancies.  
Originally this was intended  
To be a joint project  
Carried out by my granddaughter and me,  
But soon after initial construction began  
Nina lost interest  
And decided instead  
To build a modern, state-of-the art  
Medical center  
Where she could take her babies  
For the most up-to-date and humane  
Diagnosis and treatment  
For their runny noses, their ear aches and tummy aches,  
Their allergies and sore throats.  
And who would I be  
To argue against  
Such a humanitarian endeavor?  
So the two of us sat on the floor side-by-side,  
She constructing a cutting-edge healthcare facility  
And I plugging away solo on my SMPMI  
Until we both finished our work  
At about the same time.  
And now her little Rya  
Lies serenely on the examination table  
While the kindest of doctors  
Looks into her ears and eyes and throat,  
Listens to her heart,  
Administers a pain-free inoculation,  
As I survey the playroom clutter,  
My finger itching on the the Tinker Toy switch,  
Trying to decide which supremely annoying  
Shrieking plastic toy (SASPT)  
To disappear first.

*Vanessa Charlot*

*Hindu Priest*



## *The Zombie Buddies*

That's the problem with the dead: They won't hang out. I want childhood to turn up like  
a long-lost friend.

I want him to sit down across from me here in this blue vinyl booth at *Foster Freeze*  
on the corner

Of the only two cross-streets we knew by heart, in the *Food-Land* strip-mall complex  
with its parking lot

In that great anonymous *anywhere* of four-lane traffic, I might as well call 1980s  
America.

The fries are ruffled and translucent with grease. They're hot and saffron-brown. They're  
nuggeted with pecks of great sea salt,

But as the hours go on you can see that opaque luster come over them, a dullness as  
thick as a glaucoma.

I want my dead friend to show up and choose one out of the hard paper envelop again  
and use its dripping tip

To write across the phony wood tabletop. I want him to sign our names until the fry  
crumbles in his hands.

Zombie-friend who's dug himself up from where I last saw him: in that casket as long  
and white

As a pop-star's limousine. God, it's good he's back. And it's not just the same old gags  
from him now.

It's not just him writing out the Declaration of Our Independence with the sharp end of  
a fry.

It's not just him ramming the two finger-fat fries up his nose with ketchup around his  
nostrils to make me gag.

"Look what I can do; now I'm dead," he says, and before I can yell "gross," he's pulled  
off his left ear,

Shellacked it in mustard and laid between two burger buns. He's started yanking free his  
wisdom teeth

And flicking them at the three girls sitting across the aisle of the restaurant until one of  
them goes down the neckline of a blouse.

He's lifted the wig they put over his head to show me how he can run his fingers through  
the back of his mouth and out the shotgun's exit wound.

It takes a long time to stop laughing after that, and before it's over, he's wiped his hand  
on my shirt,

Which means—in the custom of boys—I've got to punch him on the shoulder, and I do  
and feel how much less he is;

Feel how little it stops my blow, feel how my fist seems to pass through the air and  
connect with nothing.

I want sit here hours and bullshit. I want to rehearse each and every line from every  
sequel  
Of *Texas Chain Saw Massacre* or *Nightmare on Elm Street* or *The Shining* or *Dawn of the Living*  
Dead.

I want to use every word from every stall in every men's room we every wrote words in  
to talk about naked Bo Derek in the *Tarzan*  
Which we snuck into to see and watched over and over again in the prehistoric darkness  
of *UA Cinemas*, in Fresno, California, that summer before anyone had ever died.

But it's only a few minutes before David tells me its time for him to go. Zombies have  
curfews.

The earth opens like a hemorrhage, and they must go back into those places to dam up  
that cold quiet,

Lying still in their dry church clothes, their hands not fidgeting, their lips holding their  
breaths

Until Jesus or someone just as good as him gives in, shows up and decides its time to  
end the world.

And it would be cool if I wanted to come along, he says. We could talk trash forever. We  
could lie on our backs

And tell each other about what we'd done with the school's most popular girl, her  
nakedness a sight we'd never seen.

It can be a *drag*, lying around, dressed up for that prom in the dark: the gravel  
and the roots of trees

Rubbing up against the coffin's sides like the gray ugly fish of the world's grayest ugly  
dream.

But I am a *wuss*, a chicken shit, a rat-fucker, who won't come, who says I've got plans  
tonight,

Who says I'll call you later, who says I want to go home, who says my daughters want  
to hold my hands,

Who says my wife has love and chores for him to do, who says I'm still pissed off  
that I waited for hours for him,

Here in our blue booth at the *Foster Freeze*, that Tuesday afternoon he went home early  
to die.

And that's when zombies start behaving badly. That's when they try to make everyone  
just like them,

When the fraying blue skin, hanging in rags around their chins and forearms, starts to get  
to you,

When their rotten hardboiled eyes won't look away. Then, what else can you tell the  
Dead?

That they're tearing at your throat? that they're gnawing you to the bones? that they're  
being *dicks*?

## *How I Wait for My Son*

Check Facebook, which at least  
tells me he was “last active”  
thirteen hours ago, which means  
not dead. Then check the L.A. County  
Sheriff’s Inmate Search Tool,  
though sometimes that has “technical  
difficulties,” and when it works,  
offers me nothing new, just  
the last arrest. Search Google,  
to find their only  
others, same name,  
different faces.

Once I couldn’t help  
but drive into Hollywood,  
because someone heard from someone  
who might have seen someone  
resembling him late  
one night at Sunset and Vine,  
so I slowed to peer at each  
loose bundle on the sidewalk  
that might have been a person,  
at every hungry young man.

I know Jesus tells us all  
about the son’s wild living,  
his hungers, his needs.  
We can richly imagine that.

But what I want to know is how  
the father waited all that time,  
remembering too much, and knowing  
too little about the boy he’d lost.

## *½ Dead Poetics*

These poems are born un-spooling from the dead side of the brain.

They are written by biting into the page. Do not be afraid of the blank page.

No need to fear. These poems are written in a language of blood and putrefaction. Verbs with hematomas, coagulated adjectives, worm-riddled words. Automated prayers that rattle like broken-down machines. These poems suppurate from the hands, they grow like mold, like a mushroom in the corner of the brain.

The dictionary is combustive in order to immolate the dead.

If libraries were empty in times of peace, just imagine what they're like during the end-of-days! The sun will consume these words at sunrise...if it rises. They'll be worthless dust.

*Poof!*

And evaporate.

*Estos poemas nacen, se hilan desde el lado muerto del cerebro.*

*Se escriben a mordidas en la página. No se teme a la hoja en blanco.*

*Ese temor falso. Estos poemas se escriben en un lenguaje hecho*

*sangre, putrefacto. Verbos con hematomas, adjetivos coagulados,*

*palabras engusanadas. Oraciones automátatas que cascabelean*

*como máquinas desvieladas. Estos poemas supuran de las manos,*

*crecen como un moho, como un hongo en la esquina del cerebro.*

*El diccionario es combustible para incendiar a los muertos.*

*Si las bibliotecas estaban vacías en tiempo de paz, ¿Qué será en tiempos del fin del mundo?*

*El sol consumirá estas palabras cuando salga Si sale.*

*Serán un polvo insignificante.*

*¡Fú!*

*Y se evaporará.*

Translation from Spanish to English by Anthony Seidman

## *I Read That Detroit Tigers' Outfield Willie Horton Approached the Crowd on the 1967 Detroit Rebellion's Opening Day*

I loved him, with Al Kaline.

But no one talked about  
when Willie drove himself home  
to 12<sup>th</sup> and Clairmount  
faced a crowd meaner than 1,000 Bob Gibsons and Donald Drysdale.

His baseball card in 1967 was Topps #465  
On back it read:

*He went on a hot tear . . .*

then listed stats from 1962 Duluth, 1963 Syracuse, 1964 Detroit.

His '68 card –

*Here's a case of the hometown boy that made good –*

No mention of rebellion: just homers and hits. No words denoting courage or amazement  
at how Willie Horton witnessed the rocks and bricks unnamed hurlers chucked into local business  
windows;

how he shouted for calm;

how he raised his hands  
for time.

## *Portraits*

#1

Lullaby Sally wore her heart  
on her tattered sleeve, scrounged  
in dumpsters and did not relinquish  
dignity. Swore like a Shakespearean  
rogue, all liquid vowels and fancy.  
Dogs loved her. She had forgiven  
all the agents of destiny, all the thin-skinned  
brats who shrugged her into the street.  
When she shuffled off one bitter night,  
the moon was pale and milky,  
her lips a spoiled blue.

#2

Ken Doll had fourteen combs  
in his spoiled backpack.  
He was a ladies man in his youth,  
charm oozing with the Hai Karate stink.  
Still fancies himself a catch, winking  
at the foodbank volunteers. After  
the war, his mind slipped and barreled  
into a tunnel. He can't abide a shelter,  
the fog of unwashed bodies, rotting socks.  
He combed his hair each morning till his heart  
exploded. They found him under the bridge,  
his blue eyes open, his hair in darling waves.

## *November Wilt*

Draped by routine shadows  
of late afternoon, I'd like a nap.  
Cannot. Briefly,  
I think I will accomplish  
something useful. Thought  
sifts between the sketchy roof  
and outrage at the fools plundering  
the earth. I'd like a nap.  
Cannot. The maple leaves are almost  
gone, a fading gold. The bear inside me  
rumbles at the shorter days. I could de-clutter  
closets or swab Venetian blinds.  
I could invent a sonnet. I'd like a nap.  
The holidays will come and treat us darkly  
as those we ought to love exasperate.  
But we'll all have new socks  
and red wine headaches.  
I'd like a nap. Cannot.

## *How to Board a Moving Ship*

*Vertigo benign*<sup>1</sup> entwines two clocks—  
my inner debates my outer  
shaker full of crystals wagering  
who will slice this cauliflower  
with serrated gone fool  
yellow my ambitions  
green my decisions  
blue my sagging sleep.

If I look in the bathroom mirror long enough  
memory will secrete its dissonance  
seeping like greasy lightning  
my head inside a Graviton  
skirts of light tumble  
through my skull spinning like a plate.

In the living room aquarium, my marine sister upside-down for weeks—  
Oranda water puppy, oversized wen anchors her belly-up all day  
she struggles to right herself, fins Morse code distress  
black eyes meet mine through water & glass.

I'd like to glide again:  
bourbon snifter affording transparency  
sandcastle totem affording horizon.

My mother returns much younger than I  
treading a path around Wade Park Lagoon  
fresh from a doctor's delivery of a life  
scars on her nerve fibers  
creeping like algae.

sentence,

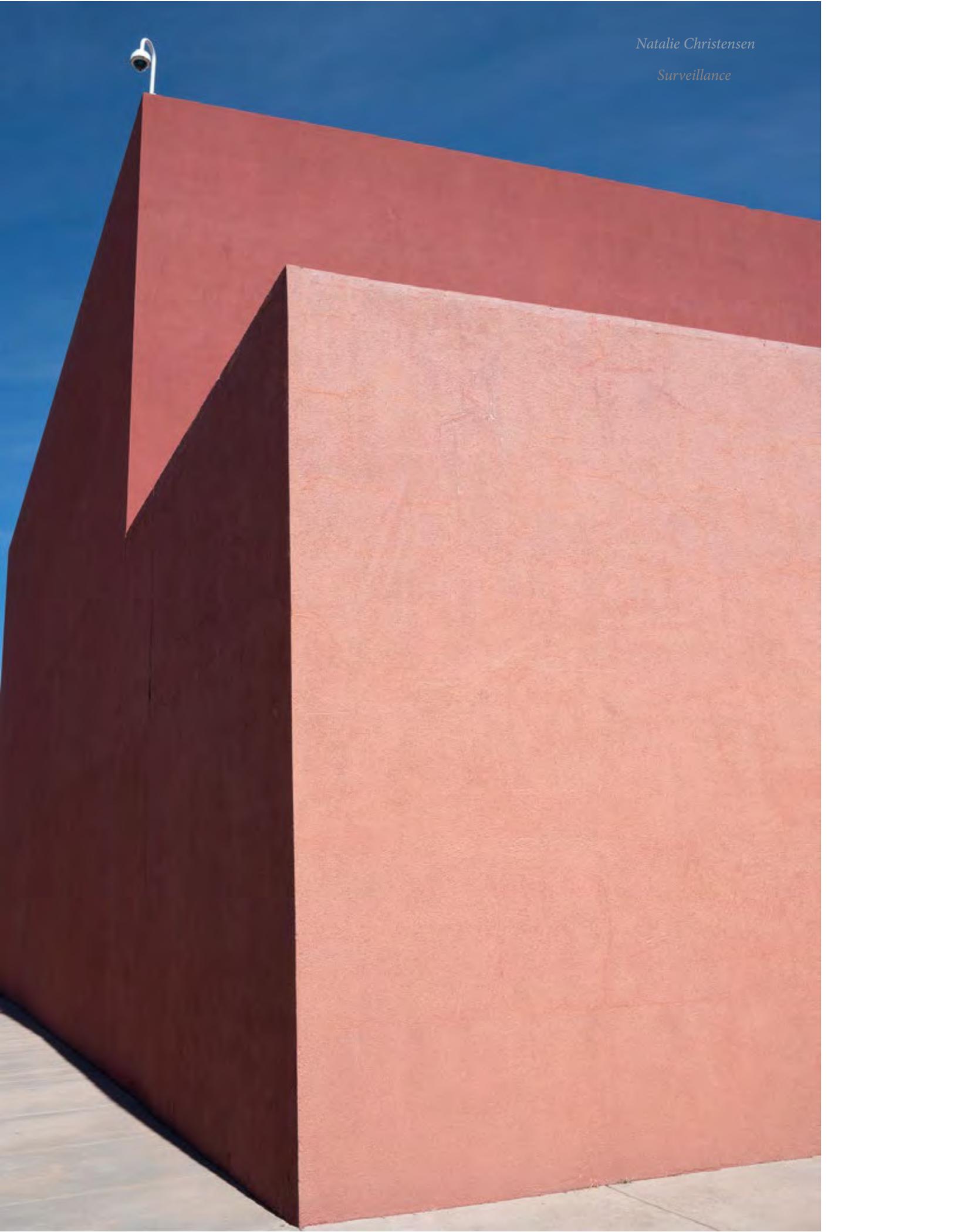
I doze, dream, a dervish virgin  
twirling in my childhood rooster dress, emerald green anklets,  
my compass gyrates against a craggy atlas.  
Oranda nestles in my cupped hand as I hold her upright in her tank.  
Her body relaxes.

We board our moving ship.

<sup>1</sup>*Vertigo benign* is an inner ear disorder that causes dizziness and a spinning sensation.

*Natalie Christensen*

*Surveillance*



*Natalie Christensen*

*Open Door*



## *Horses of Yellowknife*

Nights when spirit mountains  
Far from Yellowknife grow cold  
Brutal wind flows down seeking warmth,  
So we hear the wild horses  
That do not exist  
Crying like weeping souls  
Of indigenous children.

Then speckled wizard horses  
Galloping from dreams come  
Drumming light footed over rocks  
Skirting deep imaginary canyons  
Where precarious boulders threaten  
With their lucent nonexistent hooves  
Tapping softly glowing on bare pebbles  
Rolling slightly away under high nostrils  
Steaming frost in the dark.

Their manes lift up  
Backs shining in down  
Blowing wind  
Whinnying and whinnying  
They gather and gather  
Until one mighty herd  
Rumbles down through flat land  
Where slow domestic settlers  
Yawn nervously awake,

Feeling from sleep  
It seems their rooms move  
In a hard winter earthquake.  
Then they call out,  
The terrible storm is a white  
Tsunami blizzard,  
A herd of ghost horses  
Passing on in snow  
Dying with the wind  
As the aurora borealis  
Swims up into the night  
Like stallions undulating  
In weaving clouds.

## *Sonnet for Canadian Creation*

From Medicine Hat to Flin Flon  
As men and women search for  
Peoples' names in empty towns,  
White foxes hunker down,  
Knowing identity is like the wind,

As children feel real fear when circus clowns  
Come suddenly around loud canvas bends  
Or women know the children of their bones  
Will not remember until death has said  
The final pun and taken up their loans,

How much their mothers gave them beyond bread  
Or as the young cannot know how a kiss  
Is just a moment's lie, done sweetly up  
To make its blithe recipient remiss

With stimuli from which no elders sup,  
So we two must go on believing we  
Can cheat life's last monstrosity.

## *These Travesties*

“These travesties were women once...”

-Charles Baudelaire, “*The Little Old Women*”

Now we transform to teach  
Ourselves what is noticed, we  
Make a count of what is gone,  
Time that once was brimming,  
How all ultimately is finished,  
We cry Canada dry as we walk  
Into the catacombs of learning  
The changing pure cold fashions  
Of the dance that takes years  
In which we all shuffle.

Another autumn and these women  
Come to guess what people think.  
They scatter like pigeons  
Cough and whisper gossip.  
All know the beat of their wings  
Attracts the notice of beauty.  
They cannot look beyond this  
Wood and to the hidden shore.

They talk to each other and wrap  
Their shawls, moving their storms  
Of feet in the same rhythm as do  
Enslaved Euphrates concubines.  
Their voices play music pure  
Like a miracle their bodies  
Come and deign to dance.

## *They slipped right through my fingers...*

“They slipped right through my fingers,” she told me.  
And I remembered  
a stream of light  
trickling down a stairway.  
A string of pearls  
bouncing on a wooden floor.  
A tray of lentils  
at the edge of a counter.  
Scattered, all.  
Drops of oil in a pan of water.  
A jar full of beads,  
another, of sequins.  
Sand sifting between the fingers of a hand.  
Cracked portraits.  
An open window  
a ray of light  
with specks of dust floating in the air.  
Scattered.  
A glass of water falls.  
The water scatters.  
It goes down the drain.  
Like they’ve all gone.

*“Se fueron como el agua”, me dijo.  
Y recordé  
un chorro de luz  
resbalando por una escalera.  
Un collar de perlas  
rebotando en un piso de madera.  
Una bandeja de lentejas  
en la orilla del mostrador.  
Desparramados, todos.  
Gotas de aceite en un cazo de agua.  
Un frasco lleno de chaquiras,  
otro, de lentejuelas.  
Arena entre los dedos de la mano.  
Retratos rotos.  
Una ventana abierta  
un rayo de luz  
con puntos de polvo en el aire.  
Desparramados.  
Un vaso de agua cae.  
El agua se desparrama.  
Se va entre la rejilla.  
Como se fueron todos.*

## *Just a biological condition...*

Just a biological condition  
of the state I move in.

Just oxygen combining with memories.

What I never was,  
what I think I am.

A cell in primeval waters.

First babblings.

The sun that strips off pieces of my skin every year.

Meanwhile, the yellow petal  
of a hibiscus flower  
slowly  
detaches itself  
in the midday light.

*Sólo una condición biológica  
del estado en que transito.*

*Sólo oxígeno en la memoria.*

*Lo que no fui,  
lo que creo que soy.*

*La célula en el agua primigenia.*

*Los primeros balbuceos.*

*El sol que se lleva pedazos de mi piel cada año.*

*Mientras, el pétalo amarillo  
de una flor del obelisco  
se desprende  
lentamente  
bajo la luz del mediodía.*

*Translated from Spanish to English by Zack Rogow and Eugenio Polisk.*

## ***Fountain***

You are stone. You have lions.  
What happened to the emerald of your eyes?

*I have no eyes. A feather stole them.  
Why do you write about me in your book?*

I have no book. These pages rose  
from a breath of thunder in the street.  
Where does your water run?

*It runs from me. I am its mother.  
It blames me for the light within its veins.  
Why do you hide upon this island  
where coral vine chokes bricks?*

I am not hiding! I have come to you  
with my small lamp of flame.  
Who sculpted you? What godforsaken name?

*Stealers of conch shells raised their hands.  
Wreckers found my tongues upon a beach.  
Watch out now. Oh, yes, watch out.  
I haven't swallowed since rain last fell.  
Your face looks sweet and wet.*

## *Qurbana*

I offer my long skull and my  
electric yawn  
I offer my spilled soup and my  
exhausted member  
Joseph's coat and  
Judah's abortifacient paste  
betel chew from Murray Hill and  
Crown Fried Chicken  
I brought raw liver from Antakya  
and mango from the Siliguri sidewalk  
I brought you Johnnie Walker  
and cardamom rosewater cookies  
*Atur Mitskhekh*  
and state secrets—

and I am rending my green garments  
I am painting the car windows *adom-adom*  
I am climbing down the ladder into a tank full of oranges  
I am punishing my lungs in the kohl factory

and I have severed my toes from the footplate  
lazed among the Chinese fishing nets  
and found the Couronian wreck at Tobago

bargained my release in Nisibis  
and coughed up my blood for you in Madras  
vomiting over the rail onto taxis  
I offer immaculate gumline

## *Warning Light*

In the torrential rain  
the check engine light flashes on  
like my father suddenly awake  
in his wheelchair staring at  
the green Formica table,  
into another day of eating pea puree,  
mashed potatoes and Spam,

England's rain thrashing  
against him as he trudges  
to his tent-office  
past the C47s and gliders.

But he's drinking Kool-Aid  
looking at a gray locked door.  
Where is he now?  
Maybe taking that snapshot of

the girl on the beach, the Channel  
at her back, that place where  
a plane could slip into the gunmetal sea  
as easily as a letter  
into an envelope.

## *Stone Soup*

A rock from a wanderer's pack—  
quick rinse, then boil it.

Let me begin with this one thing  
and see what changes,

as salt might brighten broth  
or butter smear it with question marks.

You, dressed as a cow in the nursery tale,  
arrive with a carrot.

A cabbage shows up—choucrouste or slaw?  
No, I explain. It's soup.

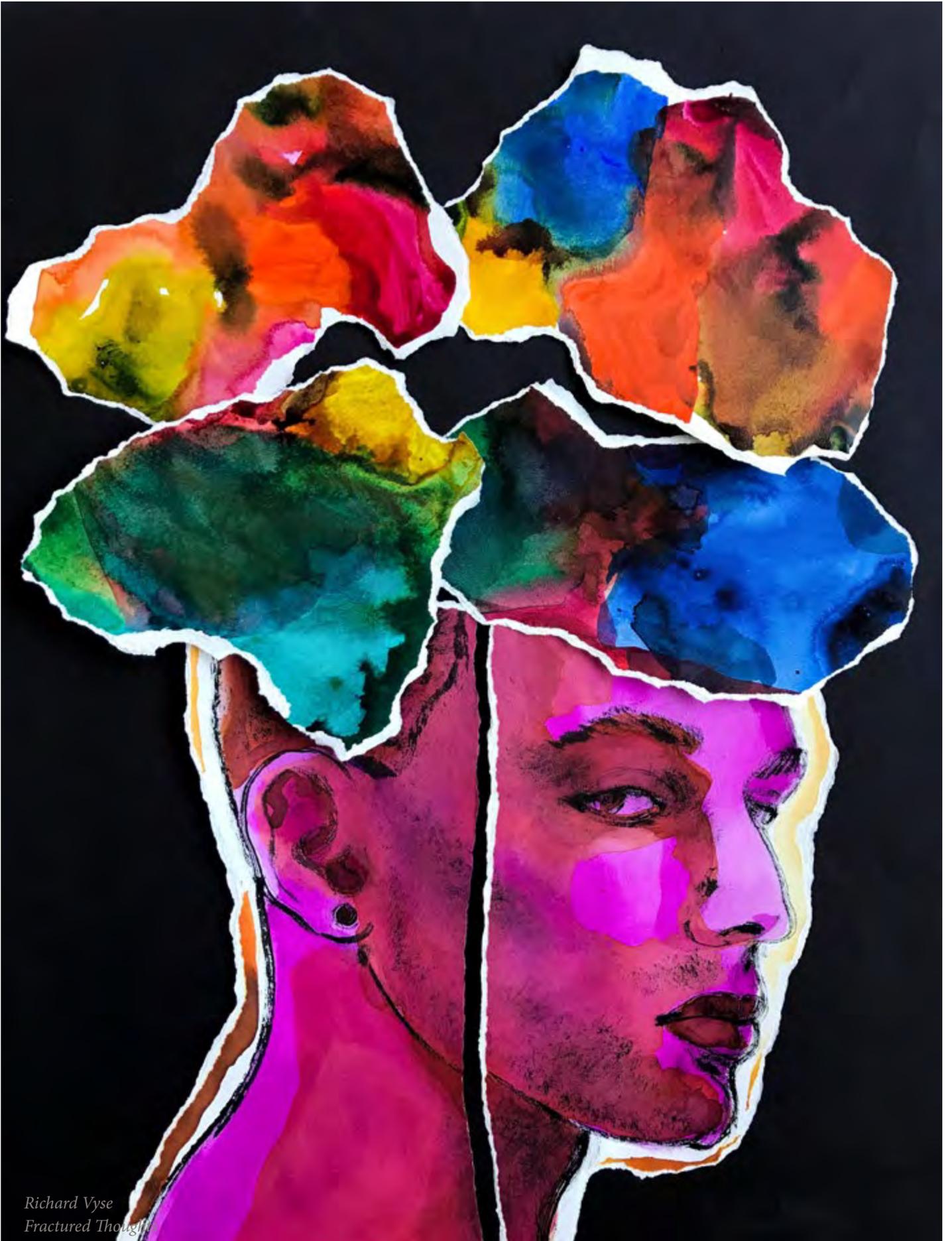
This kitchen's too crowded, Mother,  
a mouse-full of crouching cats.

*Number of servings?* Just a guideline.  
Pass the biscuits, please.

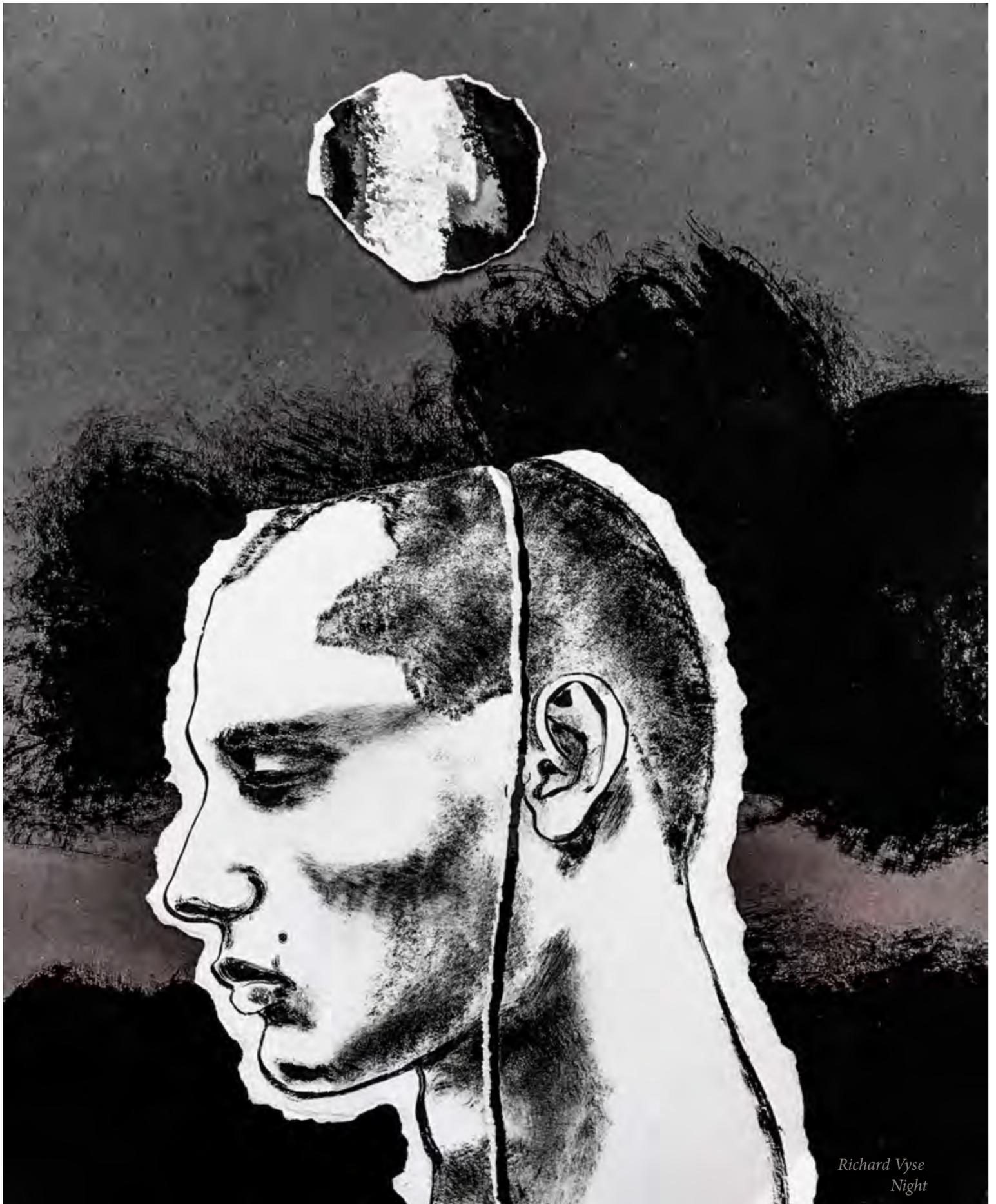
No need for a ladle here, ladies.  
We'll fish the potatoes with our hands.

## *Solitaire*

Dear dystopia, desperately sleepless,  
listening to the winter rain  
and wishing it wouldn't end.  
At three in the morning this subs for reason,  
the way luck can seem to be diligence  
though you know for sure it is not.  
Or Solitaire played constantly  
can give a sense of intimacy with the royals,  
Red Queen obviously pregnant,  
Black Jack congratulating himself,  
as you scan the sites that help pass time,  
as if time needed help. Or play again  
that version you know you cannot win  
or there's only a single chance  
and you've already blown it—  
  
that game, your favorite.



Richard Vyse  
*Fractured Thoughts*



*Richard Vyse  
Night*

## *Nameless Beach*

*“To dream of that beach  
For the sake of an instant in the eyes...”  
—George Oppen*

The wave I body-surfed  
was dangerously misappraised.

It nearly snapped me in half,  
forcing my face to the floor.

Fortunately I was able to untangle myself  
just before the crash

spit me out into the foam,  
emerging with only a skinned nose,

a red bridge of bone,  
and a blessing of salt on my lips

that was shared with my lover through a kiss,  
which consummated our location in the sand.

## *Edgeworth*

The manned platform carrying the statue of St. Rocco  
leads the procession along Highland Avenue,  
lined with parishioners who pin dollars  
to their patron saint's robe.

The bills flutter in the wind like feathers—  
a faded, feathered green  
on the brilliant green garment  
in the August sun.

But it's no ordinary procession today  
when the figure draws life from the light,  
doffs its robe, lifts off, unmanned, and circles,  
verily with feathers, above the neighborhood!

The platform topples; the incredulous crowd totters  
beneath the saintly bird's ascension.  
Amid an outburst and chorus of prayers,  
Signs of the Cross. Some say it's Horus.

Then the hybrid changes size and speed  
and disappears like a meteor.  
Without their star, the feast-goers scatter,  
while the city itself seems to unravel

from its fixed point on earth.  
The bird-saint begins a solitary migration  
through the firmament  
after blessing with its stellated eye

the patches of gardens between pavement,  
the child's nap, and the parents' too,  
a dog snatching the sausage a street vendor dropped,  
and the vendor, too.

## *As Syllable from Sound*

The spider of me  
weaves what it desires  
for all that flies,

consumes that flight  
to husks, then  
lives on the emptiness.

Feel the wind  
in silk of thrumming—  
the liquid of self is hungry.



## *Asbestos*

Dad coughed to start each day  
the way some people pray, to clear  
a path, to lift clouds away. But we  
can never clear a path, you say.  
Walk to clear your mind and all sorts  
of weather blows in. Work cutting  
asbestos to wrap around pipes,  
and all sorts of dust blows in.  
I watch the guy next door stand  
in his driveway talking to the trees.  
I watch the plow push its way  
through slush, sleet, gravel, spruce  
cones, acorn hats, and donut bags.  
Everything pushed along the street,  
through the street, becoming the street.  
Our thoughts are trash, you say,  
they pile up no matter how much  
you push them away. I wake stiff  
from walking all night, so many paths  
in the dark, wondering how my dad  
did it: waking before dawn to get  
to work, adjusting his thin paper mask  
that masked none of his rattling breaths.

## *On the Train from Krakow to Berlin, June 2017*

*A curse it is to be one's own...*

*Katarzyna Boruń-Jagodzińska, translated by Karen Kovacic*

Miles and miles of poppies  
wave to passengers unloved and unlovely  
who do not notice the slightly  
orange tainted red  
flowers standing in the sun  
or drooping their petal-heads  
in a passing shower, as if to submit  
to discipline demanded. But,  
determined, they resume their predestined  
rebellion in the rays of lengthened days.

Every flower of remembrance  
cannot obey the command  
to love. It is the curse of self  
to be one's own,  
even a little while.  
Petals fall; stems wither.  
What follows will not matter  
when the light fully wanes.

## *Secondhand Skunk*

Our dog's been sprayed,  
and though my boys bring him  
through the garage, his smell  
spreads indoors like an infection.  
Soon the carpets have caught it, too.

Lunch over, I forgo tomato soup  
as a remedy and opt for a concoction  
from the pet shop. We spend Monday  
afternoon cleaning. Our dog learns to be  
wary, but all through the scrubbing,  
re-discovering the carpet's true  
color, leaving it nearly as fresh  
as installation day, I think on  
my wife, absent now, who loved  
a good smoke, how I could scent  
cigarettes from the night before  
when she walked down the aisle  
and we were fitted together,  
kissing so our hair looked like  
two bright patches of runner.  
The wash done, I nod to the dog  
for I never could learn to mistrust.

Even when doctors confirmed the  
cancer, I didn't begrudge my bride  
her desires. Even now, the house  
revitalized, after the boys go to bed  
I skulk about, desperate for a smoky  
whiff of the brazen woman I once knew.

## *The Thing Is*

All the things that can go wrong with a body could fill a book. Lots of books. A whole medical library. But the thing is, there's no point in naming them here-- names that are sometimes long and sometimes short, sometimes Greek and sometimes Latin, and sometimes the person who first noticed, isolated and studied a thing that went wrong with a body ends up giving his name to that thing. And thenceforth the people whose bodies have that thing are given that name for the thing they have. Which is a nameless thing, really. Nameless as a thousand dialects of pain. Nevertheless, people are sometimes made to feel better when given a name for the thing they have. At least it's a thing, they think. It wasn't just in their heads. But everything is a thing before it is given a name. Even the body you have, or, more accurately, *are*, was a body before it was named. And it goes back to being one. And that's all that's ever wrong with a body. That's the thing.

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