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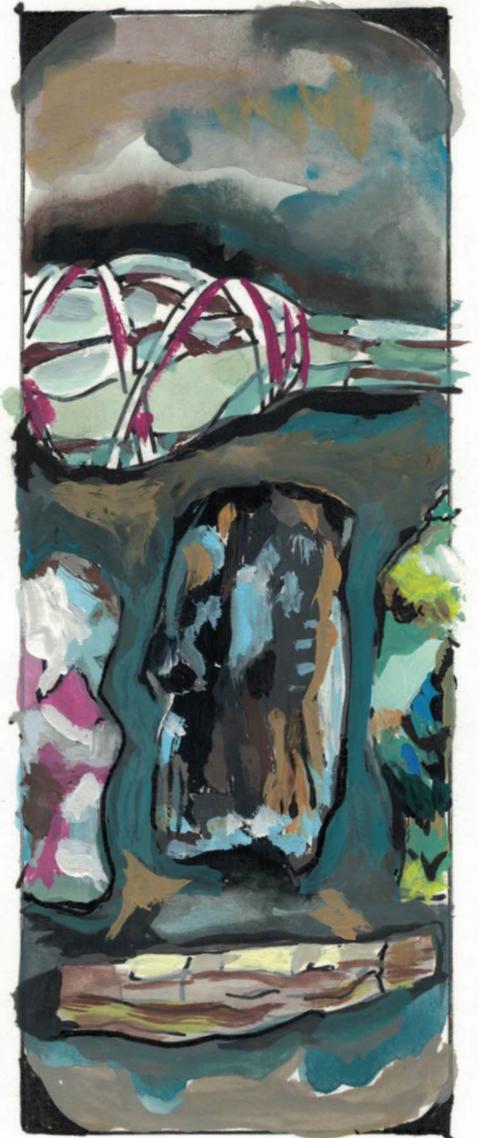
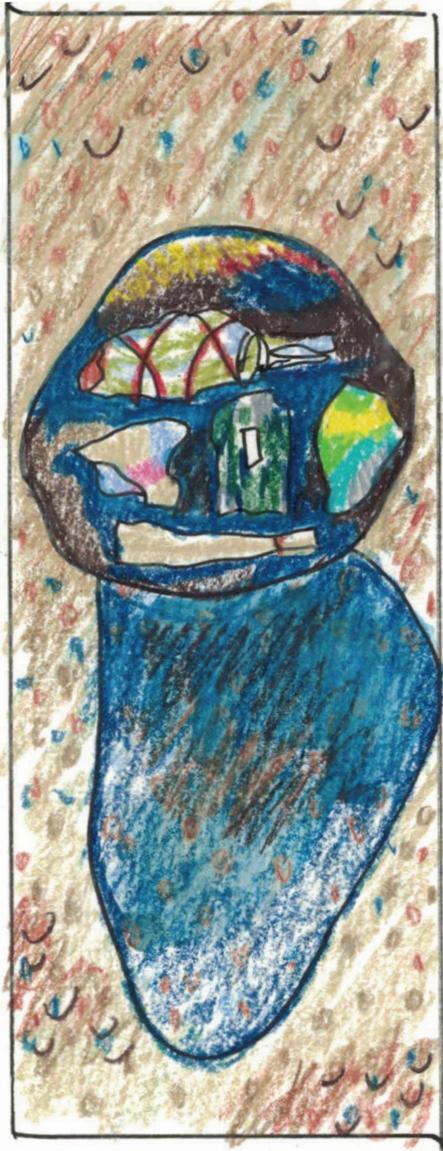
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ARTISTS & AUTHORS

Hugh Anderson

Hugh Anderson is fascinated by the way silence underlines life. Recent work has been published in Willawaw Journal, Cold Mountain Review, Sin Fronteras, and Sea and Cedar. He has been nominated twice for both the Pushcart Prize and Best of the Web.



Tim Bascom

Tim Bascom, who directs the Kansas Book Festival, is author of a novel, two collections of essays, and two prize-winning memoirs about years spent in East Africa as a youth, *Chameleon Days* and *Running to the Fire*. His essays have won editor's prizes at *The Missouri Review* and *Florida Review*, and have been selected for the anthologies *Best Creative Nonfiction* and *Best American Travel Writing*.



Joe Bisicchia

Joe Bisicchia writes of our shared dynamic. An Honorable Mention recipient for the Fernando Rielo XXXII World Prize for Mystical Poetry, he has written over two hundred individual works that have been published in nearly one hundred publications. His latest poetry collection, *Love Love to Love*, published by Cyberwit, delves into the spiritual transcendence of the noun and the verb LOVE. www.widewide.world.



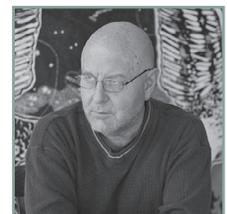
Maroula Blades

Maroula Blades is a multifaceted artist living in Berlin. She was selected for the 2021 INITIAL Special Grant from the Academy of Arts in Berlin. In 2020, Chapeltown Books (UK) released her flash fiction collection *The World in an Eye*. Ms. Blades was nominated for the Amadeu Antonio Prize 2019 for her educational multimedia project Fringe.



Steve Brisendine

Steve Brisendine is a writer, poet, occasional artist and recovering journalist living and working in Mission, Kansas. His first full-length collection, *The Words We Do Not Have* (Spartan Press, 2021), has been nominated for the Thorpe Menn Literary Excellence Award.



ARTISTS & AUTHORS

Victoria Buitron

Victoria Buitron is an award-winning writer who hails from Ecuador and resides in Connecticut. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Normal School*, *SmokeLong en Español*, *The Acentos Review*, and other literary magazines. Her debut memoir-in-essays, *A Body Across Two Hemispheres*, is the 2021 Fairfield Book Prize winner and available wherever books are sold.



Clara Burghilea

Clara Burghilea is a Romanian-born poet with an MFA in Poetry from Adelphi University. Recipient of the Robert Muroff Poetry Award, her poems and translations appeared in *Ambit*, *Waewxwing*, *The Cortland Review* and elsewhere. Her second poetry collection *Praise the Unburied* was published with Chaffinch Press in 2021. She is Review Editor of *Ezra, An Online Journal of Translation*.



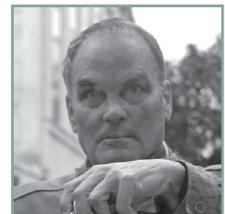
Akhim Yuseff Cabey

Akhim Yuseff Cabey is a Pushcart Prize-winning black author whose work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Callaloo*, *Indiana Review*, *the minnesota review*, *TriQuarterly*, *Shenandoah*, *Passages North*, *The Florida Review*, and elsewhere. A six-time recipient of the Ohio Arts Council Individual Excellence Award, he is originally from the Bronx, New York, and now lives in Columbus, Ohio.



Roger Camp

Roger Camp is the author of three photography books including the award-winning *Butterflies in Flight* (Thames & Hudson, 2002), and *Heat* (Charta, 2008). His documentary photography has been awarded the prestigious Leica Medal of Photography. His photographs are represented by the Robin Rice Gallery, NYC. His work has appeared in *The New England Review*, *Southwest Review*, *Chicago Review* and *the New York Quarterly*.



Lorraine Caputo

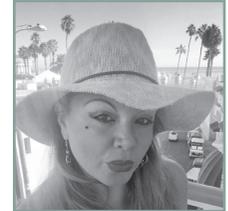
Lorraine Caputo is a documentary poet, translator and travel writer. Her works appear in over 300 journals on six continents and in twenty collections of poetry – including *On Galápagos Shores* (dancing girl press, 2019). Her writing has been nominated for the Best of the Net. She journeys through Latin America, listening to the voices of the pueblos and Earth.



ARTISTS & AUTHORS

Clarissa Cervantes

Clarissa Cervantes is an outdoor travel photographer. Clarissa also supplies freelance travel articles on a variety of travel destinations for newspaper, blogs, websites and magazines such as *USA Today* and *LA Times*. Clarissa's photo gallery includes unique images from all over the globe, where she finds inspiration to share her photographs with others through her creative lens, inviting the viewer to question and explore the world with creative eyes.



Rachel Coyne

Rachel Coyne is a painter and writer from rural Minnesota.



William C. Crawford

William C. Crawford is a prolific itinerant photographer based in Winston Salem, NC.



Starrla Cray

Starrla Cray is a writer, teacher, journalist, and lifelong Minnesota resident. She recently graduated with an MFA degree in creative writing from Minnesota State University, Mankato. If you can't find her, she's probably doing one of three things: hugging her family, looking for trees to climb, or eating super dark chocolate.



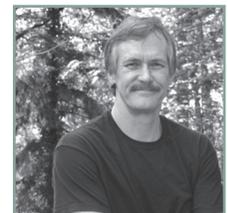
Scott Davidson

Scott Davidson grew up in Montana, worked for the Montana Arts Council as a Poet in the Schools, and – after most of two decades in Seattle – lives with his wife in Missoula. His poems have appeared in *Southwest Review*, *Hotel Amerika*, *Terrain.org*, *Bright Bones: Contemporary Montana Writing*, and the Permanent Press anthology *Crossing the River: Poets of the Western United States*.



John Davis

John Davis is a polio survivor. His work has appeared recently in *DMQ Review*, *Iron Horse Literary Review* and *Terrain.org*. He lives on an island in the Salish Sea.



ARTISTS & AUTHORS

Linda Dedkova

Linda Dedkova (she/they) is a queer emerging writer, documentary filmmaker and clown-in-training from Czechia, currently finishing her MA in Gender Studies at Charles University in Prague. They live in Berlin and like mermaids, black tea and ballet.



Matt Dennison

Matt Dennison is the author of *Kind Surgery*, from Urtica Press (Fr.) and *Waiting for Better*, from Main Street Rag Press. His work has appeared in *Verse Daily*, *Rattle*, *Bayou Magazine*, *Redivider*, *Natural Bridge*, *The Spoon River Poetry Review* and *Cider Press Review*, among others. He has also made short films with Michael Dickes, *Swoon*, *Marie Craven* and *Jutta Pryor*.



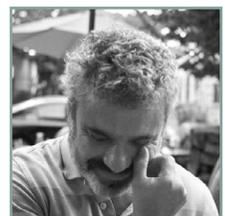
Edward Dougherty

Edward A. Dougherty's newest book *Journey Work* (2021, Apprentice House Press) traces his volunteer work at a peace center in Hiroshima, Japan and his spiritual explorations from his Roman Catholic upbringing to a 7 day silent Buddhist retreat. He is also the author of five chapbooks, the most recent of which is *House of Green Water* (FootHills Publishing).



Steven Hefter

Steve Hefter lives in Baltimore. He has inordinately strong opinions on prose, songwriting, film dialogue, pizza, and the Orioles. Portland imprint Party Damage Records (Andy Shauf, Wild Ones) released two of his albums under the nom de plume, St. Even. He is currently working on a collection of essays tentatively entitled *Glossolalia*.



Kathleen Hellen

Kathleen Hellen's collection *meet me at the bottom* is forthcoming in Fall 2022 from Main Street Rag. Her credits include *The Only Country Was the Color of My Skin*, her award-winning collection *Umberto's Night*, published by Washington Writers' Publishing House, and two chapbooks, *The Girl Who Loved Mothra* and *Pentimento*.



K. Carlton Johnson

K. Carlton Johnson is an artist and poet living on the cusp of Lake Superior. Work has appeared in *Rattle*, *Diner*, and *Pacific Review*.



ARTISTS & AUTHORS

Seth Jani

Seth Jani lives in Seattle, Washington and is the founder of Seven Circle Press. Their work has appeared in *The American Poetry Journal*, *Chiron Review*, *Ghost City Review*, *Rust+Moth* and *Pretty Owl Poetry*, among others. Their full-length collection, *Night Fable*, was published by FutureCycle Press in 2018. Visit them at www.sethjani.com.



Dorothy Johnson-Laird

Dorothy Johnson-Laird is a poet and social worker who lives in New York City. She received an M.F.A in creative writing from Sarah Lawrence College. Dorothy has a passion for African music and has published music journalism with *Afropop.org* and *Worldmusiccentral.org*, among others. Recent poems were accepted for publication by *Evening Street Review* and *BeZine*.



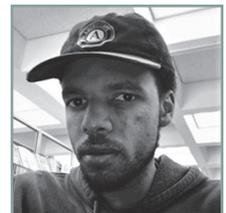
Jeanne Karen

Jeanne Karen is an award-winning Mexican poet based in San Luis Potosí. She is the author of various poetry collections, including *Púrpura Nao* (2018) and *Menta* (2019).



Alexander Kemp

Alexander Kemp is an emerging writer whose work has previously appeared in *Santa Clara Review*, *Nzuri*, and *The Gateway Review*. He's an MPA graduate from the University of Southern California. He works as a Career Advisor for adults with disabilities and lives in Los Angeles, California.



Tricia Knoll

Tricia Knoll is a Vermont poet with a voice disability. She has learned the power of silence. Her poetry appears widely in journals and anthologies and 5 collections. *How I Learned To Be White* received the 2018 Human Relations Indie Book Award for Motivational Poetry. *Let's Hear It for the Horses* came out in 2022. She is a Contributing Editor of *Verse Virtual*. Website: triciaknoll.com



ARTISTS & AUTHORS

Edward Lee

Edward Lee is an artist and writer from Ireland. His paintings and photography have been exhibited widely, while his poetry, short stories, non-fiction have been published in magazines in Ireland, England and America, including *The Stinging Fly*, *Skylight 47*, *Acumen* and *Smiths Knoll*. He is currently working on two photography collections: *Lying Down With The Dead* and *There Is A Beauty In Broken Things*. <https://edwardmlee.wordpress.com>



Tim Louis Macaluso

Tim Louis Macaluso is an openly gay poet, writer, and award-winning journalist. He has worked in media for much of his career. Most recently, he was a staff writer for *CITY Newspaper* in Rochester, New York, where he wrote extensively about poverty, urban education, and progressive politics. His poetry has appeared in numerous print and online publications, including *ImageOutWrite*, the literary arm of Rochester's LGBTQ+ film festival.



Tyler McCurry

Tyler McCurry is a 31-year-old author from Olathe, Kansas with a passion for food, family and fun. His work has appeared in *Davega Bicycle*, *Aphelion Webzine*, *Mind's Eye*, the University of Kansas literary magazine *Coal City Review*, *Grand Little Thing*, *Fleas on the Dog*, *Clinch: A Martial Arts Literary Magazine* and *Sunspot*.



Joyce Miller

Joyce served as a senior editorial assistant for *The Cincinnati Review* and her work has been published in *The RavensPerch*, *Crack the Spine*, *Serving House Journal*, *aaduna*, and *Venture; Ohio Voices*. She currently teaches Italian in the Romance and Arabic Languages and Literatures Department at the University of Cincinnati, where she is a founding member of UC Adjunct Advocacy Association and elected representative of part-time faculty to the Faculty Senate.



Tim J. Myers

Tim J. Myers is a writer, storyteller, songwriter, visual artist, and senior lecturer at Santa Clara University. He writes for adults and young people. His work has made the New York Times bestseller list for children's books, has been reviewed in the Times, and has been read aloud on NPR.



ARTISTS & AUTHORS

Toti O'Brien

Toti O'Brien is the Italian accordionist with the Irish last name. Born in Rome, living in Los Angeles, she is an artist, musician and dancer. She is the author of *Other Maidens* (BlazeVOX, 2020), *An Alphabet of Birds* (Moonrise Press, 2020), *In Her Terms* (Cholla Needles Press, 2021), *Pages of a Broken Diary* (Psky's Porch, 2022) and *Alter Alter* (Elyssar Press, 2022).



Steven Ostrowski

Steven Ostrowski is a fiction writer, poet and painter whose work appears widely in literary journals and anthologies. He's published more than a dozen of his paintings, including several as covers. He's recently published fiction in *American Short Fiction*, *Midway Journal*, *river, river* and *Cloudbank*. Steven is the author of six chapbooks--five of poems and one of stories.



Gail Peck

Gail Peck holds an M.F.A. from The Program for Writers at Warren Wilson College and is the author of nine books of poetry. Her poems have been published in *Nimrod*, *Southern Review*, *Greensboro Review*, *Comstock* and elsewhere. Her work has been nominated for Best of the Net and a Pushcart.



Laura Plummer

Laura Plummer is an American writer and poet from Massachusetts. Her work has been featured in several print and online publications. lauraplummer.me.



Jordan Reed

Jordan Reed is a theater maker and performance artist in Bushwick NYC. Originally from Massachusetts, she graduated with a BA in Theater from the UMass Amherst Theater Department in 2017. Her work has been featured in the 2019 Western MA Poetry & Visual Arts Biennial, the 2021 ChaShaMa Gala, and the 2021 *Protest Through Poetry Anthology*.



Cindy Rinne

Cindy Rinne creates fiber art and writes in San Bernardino, CA. She is the author of several books: *The Feather Ladder* (Picture Show Press), *Words Become Ashes: An Offering* (Bamboo Dart Press), *Today in the Forest* with Toti O'Brien (Moonrise Press), and others. Her poetry has appeared in *The Journal of Radical Wonder*, *Mythos Magazine*, *A Moon of One's Own*, *Verse-Virtual*, and others. www.fiberverse.com



ARTISTS & AUTHORS

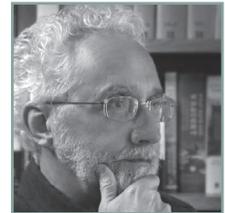
Bruce Robinson

Recent work by Bruce Robinson appears or is forthcoming in *Tar River Poetry*, *Spoon River*, *Mantis*, *Loud Coffee Press*, *Rattle*, *Oddball*, and *Parliament*. He last appeared in *Aji* in spring 2000.



David Anthony Sam

David Anthony Sam lives in Virginia with his wife and life partner, Linda. His poetry has appeared in over 100 journals. Sam's collection *Writing the Significant Soil* was awarded the 2021 Poetry Prize at Homebound Publications, whose imprint Wayfarer Books will publish Summer 2022. Sam's collection *Stone Bird* will be published by San Francisco Bay Press in 2023. Six other collections are in print.



Claire Scott

Claire Scott is an award winning poet who has received multiple Pushcart Prize nominations. Her work has appeared in the *Atlanta Review*, *Bellevue Literary Review*, *New Ohio Review*, *Enizagam* and *Healing Muse* among others. Claire is the author of *Waiting to be Called* and *Until I Couldn't*. She is the co-author of *Unfolding in Light: A Sisters' Journey in Photography and Poetry*.



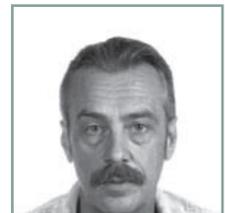
Samantha Steiner

Samantha Steiner is a writer and visual artist. She has received fellowships from the Fulbright Foundation and the Saltonstall Foundation for the Arts. She holds a BA in Comparative Literature from Brown University and an MFA in Writing from Sarah Lawrence College. Find her on social media @Steiner_Reads.



Edward Supranowicz

Edward Michael Supranowicz is the grandson of Irish and Russian/Ukrainian immigrants. He grew up on a small farm in Appalachia. He has a grad background in painting and printmaking. Some of his artwork has recently or will soon appear in *Fish Food*, *Streetlight*, *Another Chicago Magazine*, *The Door Is a Jar*, *The Phoenix*, and *The Harvard Advocate*. Edward is also a published poet.



ARTISTS & AUTHORS

Jeremy Szuder

Jeremy Szuder worked for 15 years as a musician, has done graphic design work, 25 years of self-published zines, fine art, 10 years deejaying, and continues to have illustrations and poems published by fine art and literary publications across the U.S.A. and Canada. Jeremy Szuder lives in Glendale, California. jeremyszuder@gmail.com <https://jeremyszuder.wordpress.com/>



Daniel Tarker

Daniel Tarker (He, him) holds an MFA in Creative Writing from San Francisco State University and a Doctorate in Higher Education Leadership from Oregon State University. Since turning his hand from theatre to prose during the pandemic, his fiction has been published in *Lothorien*, *Confetti Literary Journal*, *Marrow Magazine*, and *Once Upon a Crocodile*. You can find more at his websites danieltarker.com and tarker.substack.com.



Meredith Trede

Meredith Trede's books are *Tenement Threnody* and *Field Theory*, (*Bringing Back the House* will be published next year.) and a chapbook, *Out of the Book*. Her many journal publications include *Friends Journal*, *Gargoyle*, and *Paris Review*. She has received residencies at Blue Mountain Center, Ragdale, Saltonstall and VCCA. She lives in New York City. www.meredithtrede.com



Erin Wilson

Erin Wilson's poems have recently appeared or are forthcoming in *december magazine*, *Tar River Poetry*, *Mason Street Review*, *The Honest Ulsterman*, and in numerous other publications. Her first collection is *At Home with Disquiet*; her second, *Blue*, is forthcoming (both from Circling Rivers). She lives in a small town on Robinson-Huron Treaty territory in Northern Ontario, Canada.



Bill Wolak

Bill Wolak has just published his eighteenth book of poetry entitled *All the Wind's Unfinished Kisses* with Ekstasis Editions. His collages and photographs have appeared as cover art for such magazines as *Phoebe*, *Harbinger Asylum*, *Baldhip Magazine*, *Barfly Poetry Magazine*, *Ragazine*, and *Cardinal Sins*.



EDITOR'S WELCOME

“He who does not understand your silence will probably not understand your words.”

-Elbert Hubbard

Cheryl Glenn, Distinguished Professor of English and Women's Studies at Pennsylvania State University, published a book called *Unspoken: A Rhetoric of Silence* (Southern Illinois University Press, 2004). *Unspoken* asserts that those who speak and are heard enjoy most of the power in our world; they assume that the silence of others implies complacency, or agreement with what the loud ones are saying or doing. Nothing could be further from the truth. It is necessary for the strongest, most urgent voices to calm themselves and to open themselves so that the silent others may come forward to speak their truths. Those unwilling to consider the experiences of others, to appreciate their values and beliefs although admittedly different, are unfortunately living in a very myopic, one-sided version of reality, a solipsistic existence too fearful or arrogant to imagine beyond the expedient or convenient.

While not adopting or attempting to advance any particular polemic, *Aji's* editors are committed to affirming the rights of all to share their creative expressions. We are committed to supporting artists in an environment that does not censor so long as contributors do not devalue anyone. When possible, we will invite the silent ones to enter our space, to speak, if you will, in a safe, supportive space.

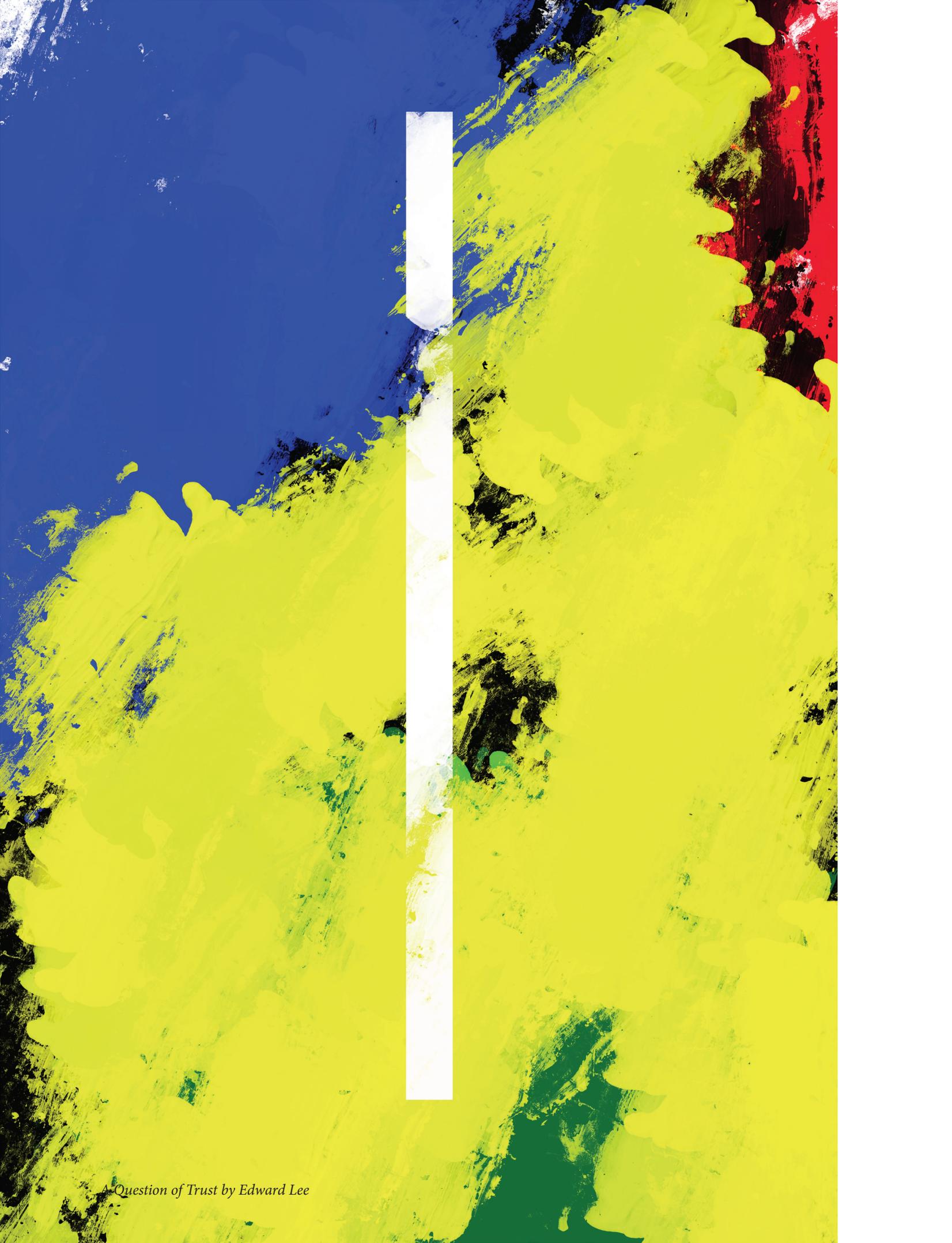
We are proud to offer new voices in this issue, especially that of Vanessa Manzano, who we are able to present to you via the dedication and tireless work of John Allen, who translated from the Spanish as needed. We are proud to be able to include some samples of her songs on our blog—you have to hear them! Thanks to William Nesbitt, we are honored to be offering readers the second part of his interview of Keith Hamilton Cobb, who has much to teach us about his experiences as a playwright and actor living and working in the contemporary U.S.

Every poem, story, essay, photograph, or work of graphic art in this issue invites readers to consider alternative experiences and ways of being, coaxes us out of our day-to-day normal into someone else's world. Pieces in this issue will inspire laughter, pathos, and perhaps deep reflection. In a world where writers, musicians, and artists are being silenced, threatened, imprisoned, even killed, we are so thankful for all of you, for the communities from which you come, for the unique perspectives you share with *Aji*, a small magazine, to some degree a speck on the stage of contemporary national art and literature.

Yet we are so glad to be here, humbled and glad, that the creative inspiration of so many talented writers, photographers, musicians and artists is freely offered to us issue after issue, and that we are able to present those creative works to a growing list of subscribers and readers. Issue after issue, we are heartened by the quality of work we are receiving, and we are thrilled to be able to publish as much as possible for your reading and viewing pleasure. To all who contributed or submitted, and to all who devoted your time to this issue and to *Aji's* mission, a sincere thanks. It is your talent and generosity that make this magazine what it is. Enjoy!



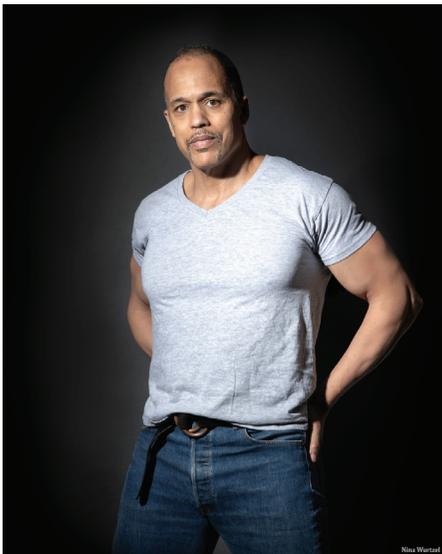

Erin O'Neill Armendarez, Editor in Chief





Not Allowed to Think by Edward Lee

Othello as Written Is an Inhuman Shell: An Interview with Keith Hamilton Cobb Part II



Keith Hamilton Cobb

Interview conducted by William Nesbitt

A graduate of New York University's Tisch School of the Arts with a BFA in acting, Keith Hamilton Cobb has portrayed a variety of theater and television characters. He wrote and starred in *American Moor*, a complex examination of Black identity within the American theater. Numerous theaters have featured the play including New York's off-Broadway Cherry Lane Theatre and the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse at Shakespeare's Globe. In this second part of this two-part interview, we discuss racism, the connections among various television characters and *Othello*, and the ending of *American Moor*.

William Nesbitt (WN): I've read *American Moor*, but only seen clips of the performance. Despite the seriousness, there are moments when the audience laughs. There is this passage, for example: "A little white man is asking me if I have any questions about being a large Black man, enacting the role of a large Black man in a famous Shakespeare play about a large Black man which for the last fifty, sixty years or so has been more or less wholly the province of large Black men . . . No . . . I ain't got no questions." Why did you decide to include humor in *American Moor*? Is that something that you intended in the writing, or did you develop that later on in the performance of *American Moor*?

Keith Hamilton Cobb (KHC): Both. You write what you write. There was always something absurd about the very idea expressed in that passage. Always. The truth of it makes it absurd and tragic all at the same

time. You've heard people say, "You gotta laugh to keep from crying." Then you get into rehearsal and you begin to experience how the language exits your body. Is it in your voice? Is it in how your body moves or where it comes to rest? The tragic absurdity as it is expressed becomes a moment for all of us to laugh together. That's how theater works. But it's not a laugh riot. It's worrisome. It's a worrisome laughter. Everyone taking part in that knows that we are laughing at something that ultimately is more tragic for its truth than funny. That's most of the laughter that arises in *American Moor*.

WN: In the introduction, Kim F. Hall says that "we can stop the racism in theater and in our own lives, if we can make the space and time for learning and listening." What else can we do, especially those of us in academia?

KHC: Yes, as she suggests, you can read and you can listen. You can contemplate and attempt to change the white-leaning biases in your pedagogy—and I assure you they are there. You can trumpet loudly your awareness that the privileges that you enjoy as a white American citizen are unjust because they are not shared by those who do not look like you. That's another truth. You can attempt to counter whatever level of white obliviousness you have every day and I don't say that as a pejorative. I don't say that to indict you. I'm just saying that if you are brought up in this American culture, in all that it has been, brought up in the ways of American white right capitalism, you have blind spots. Lots of them. It takes work. It's a fulltime practice because you first have to acknowledge it and then work through the experience of the discomfort of mind and body that it causes.

I get these people asking me in post-performance discussions around *American Moor*, "Well, I'm a liberal white woman who understands my privilege. I want to change this, but I don't know how. I feel helpless as



Terrell Donnell Sledge, Keith Hamilton Cobb, Dr. David Sterling Brown, and Robert Manning (left to right)

to what to do. What do I do?" I say you know if all the wealth that you have, which keeps you comfortable and assures you a life worth living, is the manifestation first of American chattel slavery and then hundreds of years of disenfranchisement of Black Americans—and it is—are you going to divest yourself of it? Are you going to sell your house and live in the only housing affordable by the nearly 20% of Black Americans? Or share your income amongst those who on national average make 1/8 of what you do only because they are Black and have historically not had any of the opportunities that you have been afforded? No, of course you're not going to do that. If you're asking me what you can do to help, it's because you're blind to how obvious the answers are. The bigger question is: What would you *do* to help? What would you *do*, and only you can answer that. It's not easy stuff.

WN: I'm thinking of your previous television roles as Tyr Anasazi from *Andromeda* and Damon Porter from *The Young and the Restless*. I see a through-line with these characters and Othello. Do you also see similarities among them?

KHC: Well, what's the through-line that you see?

WN: I see them as outsider characters. Tyr is part of the *Andromeda* crew, but he's the only member of the Nietzschean race among the crew and he's the last surviving member of the Kodiak Pride. His agenda begins to diverge more and more from the crew's goals as he focuses on using his son's DNA to represent himself as the reincarnation of Drago Museveni. Having established himself as the Nietzschean messiah, he unites the Prides and ends up fighting against his original crew members. Damon Porter shows up on *The Young and the Restless*, and he's a character that doesn't play by all of the rules. He makes choices you wouldn't expect a lot of soap characters to make. By this I mean that he minds his own business, thinks before he acts, tries to stay out of the drama. He gets sucked into all of that, of course, but eventually decides to reconcile with his wife and head back to his ranch in Atlanta. Othello is on the inside in a way because he's a general and married to Desdemona, the daughter of a Venetian senator. Obviously, he's on the outside because of the way he is treated.

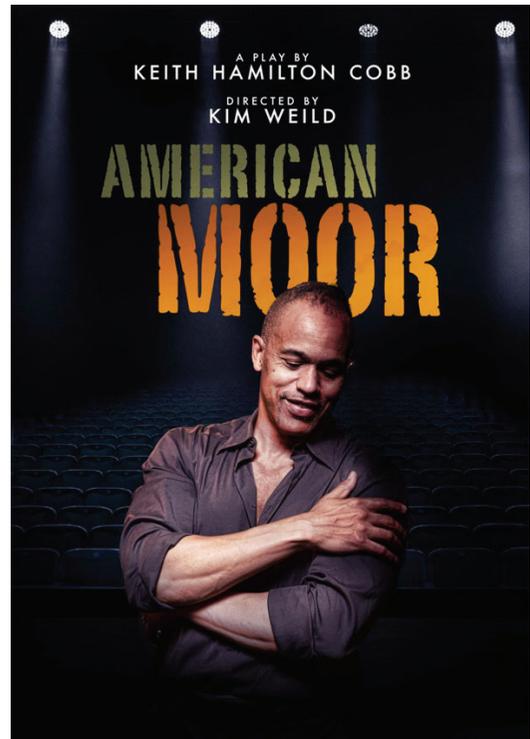
KHC: It's interesting to hear your thoughts on all that. I think you're right, William, that the outsider status would be the thing that links them all together. They did have sort of their own rules that they played by. With daytime characters like Damon Porter, you always have to be suspicious of what is character-driven and what is plot-driven—with sci-fi, too. Most everything is plot-driven so the characters are shaped to fit whatever the plot is. Whatever serves the plot, that's what the character is going to do. So you can build characters of dimension and depth that follow certain rules. You take from the show bible what was originally said about the character and then you do your acting work to create that character, layer that character, and dimensionalize that character. And if it does not fit the plot, somebody's going to make you change that.

WN: To be clear have you or have you not played the role of Othello?

KHC: I have not played the role of Othello despite being urged perpetually. That's one of the ironies being delineated in *American Moor*. Nobody says, "Play Hamlet. Play Romeo. Othello, Othello, Othello." But I've never played the role. I find him as Shakespeare wrote him most unlike the others you mentioned and I'll add one. The first daytime character that I created was Noah Keefer from *All My Children*, another long-

term daytime role and all of these characters whether it be Tyr, Damon, or Noah, they were generally thoughtful and proactive men. Now, they inhabited these niche genres. Both soap operas and sci-fi are mediums that people either watch or they don't. No one is ever going to spend a great deal of time scrutinizing the creative value of these characters. But for the record, they were characters who reasoned, planned, and executed like intelligent human beings do. To the extent that any director or producer was interested in supporting those traits in those characters, they were fun to portray. Othello, again as Shakespeare wrote him, is none of that as far as I'm concerned.

WN: On first consideration, that's surprising because we might be inclined to assume that because he appears in a Shakespeare play and is a central character, Othello is automatically deeper, more developed and nuanced, than these characters we've discussed from the sci-fi and daytime television genres.



Cover Art for American Moor

KHC: Othello is an easily manipulated dupe, all surface emotion and no depth. He exists as a foil against which his adversary can shine like some wicked Arlecchino character in a piece of commedia dell'arte. Iago gets to bounce around and create affinity with the audience. In contemporary productions, Othello is little more than a laughingstock because Shakespeare has not written him with the least power of discernment or reason. All of those other three characters, in spite of the facile nature of the medium they inhabited, were far more nuanced and interesting as layered human beings. No actor wants to portray a character that isn't proactive and doesn't have some agency to impact his environment. For me, Othello as written is an inhuman shell. Any humanity has to be infused via a process like the one being put forward in Untitled Othello, a process that takes time and depth and conversation and communication and close reading and scrutiny and more time. That's the way you'll find a better Othello. But I think he sits outside of that group. In creating all those characters, it was about trying to find a reality to play even in daytime, which is unreal. Sci-fi is unreal and all about these fantastical plots, but you try to find some reality to play because we're human beings. I can't play it if I can't recognize it. If it's nonsense, I can't play it.

WN: If you could play him the way that you wanted to, would you ever play Othello?

KHC: Yeah! I think so. I think so. That would require a really smart director who wanted to communicate with me. When I originally started fomenting the Untitled Othello Project, I thought playing him the way I want to was something that I was going to do, but I realized that I couldn't direct myself. That always smacks of vanity. It's always a bad idea, particularly on stage to direct oneself, especially in a play like this, so I thought, well, I will just continue to do this work of putting together this ensemble and scrutinizing this play, take it to them, help them shape it, and hire someone else to be this Othello and

communicate with that person like the director that I would like to have if I were doing it. But, sure, if I were allowed this sort of time, if I were allowed the situation that the actor in my project is getting, I'd do it.

WN: Is there an official release of *American Moor* as a DVD or Blu-ray or something like that? Is that going to come out at some point? I ask because I'd like to watch the entire production.

KHC: Well, there is a version of it that I can share with you, William. We do not have an official release of what I would call the definitive production of the play. We have a definitive production. When we were off-Broadway in the fall of 2019, that production was pretty much everything that I thought the play should be in presentation and what it should look like. We have an archival video of that, but we can't release it. There are too many permissions involved. There is an earlier version that we did at the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse at Shakespeare's Globe in London in the summer of 2018, which was an earlier version of the script before the script was published. The difficulty with that is severalfold. First of all, it was again, an archival single-fixed camera video meant to just keep a record. The Wanamaker Playhouse has no artificial lighting. It is lit by candles from chandeliers [laughs]. We did this as part of the first annual Shakespeare and Race festival that they host at the Globe every year now. To look at the video, there's something very interesting about this play being done on that stage in the home of Shakespeare. That's exciting and interesting to people. The story still gets told. It was a good audience. It was a good energy in the house but, again, it is not definitive. We have shown it to groups of classes at various universities where people ask for some sort of visual version, video version, but I say unless your class is reading the text, unless you are doing the play, and they

have that to compare it to, the fear is that they look at this thing and say, "Oh, that's the play," and it's not. It's different. There's enough there that it's worth sharing, and I make arrangements from institution-to-institution, individual-to-individual, to do that but I tend to insist that you be studying the play, the Methuen text, as well.

WN: Please talk some about the ending, or maybe open ending, in *American Moor*.

KHC: Expand on that. What is it you want to know?

WN: The end of the play seems to hang there in this pregnant moment. The way that I read it there's an openness and I wonder if the director is maybe going to try to have some kind of conversation with the actor. In some ways that would be the hope or the desired ending. Or have these things that the actor said rolled off of the director's back? We see this really great examination of the actor's mindset, his struggles, his conflicts, and so on, but at least at this moment in the play, nothing more will happen. There isn't going to be this dialogue. The actor realizes that the director is not going to listen to him. Maybe the next director will. Maybe not. Maybe this director will do some thinking in the next audition and he is going to listen and talk to someone in a future audition, but in this moment, in this play, this director is not going to have this dialogue with this actor. That's the way I read it. In my reading that would also be very realistic, but would also very final and a little bit of a downer or let down. However, it's a very realistic ending, very possible, still makes a strong point and whether the director listens to the actor or not doesn't negate the importance and the power and all of the thoughts and so forth that the actor expresses throughout the play.

I don't want to ask you how it ends, but I'm curious what possibilities you see for the ending.

KHC: What you just put forth, William, with all the various scenarios that that ending conjures, it could be any of them, depending on who the audience member is. And that's good drama. Were I to make it more definitive, that would be lesser drama because then I would be telling the audience member "This is what you're supposed to think here." It's not my job to do that; it's my job to, hopefully, portray truth. It is my truth. We know that at least for the moment that actor, after all that he's been through in that process, is dismissed. We also know that the director in the wake of the actor's final plea has taken some time to contemplate something. Something happens in that pause, and he makes some choice. We don't know what and we don't know why, but we do know that in the final analysis, in that moment, on that day, this has to end here. What that director does, how he's impacted when he leaves, we don't know. We know more about the actor because the actor says, "I'll be back." The actor says, "Any time" now that he's had this revelation, has gone through this sort of arduous, traumatic process of self-discovery in this play. He says, "I'm gonna keep showing up," and he's going to come to his next audition with no hesitancy about telling people what they should hear and what they should know, whether that loses him the job or wins him the job. He's going to do what allows him to like himself at the end of the day. The question has come up often: Is there hope in that? In post-performance discussions people ask, "Well, where is the hope?" I say, "There's great hope in that, at least for the actor, for that Black man saying, 'I will continue to thrive irrespective of what you do.'" That's hopeful.

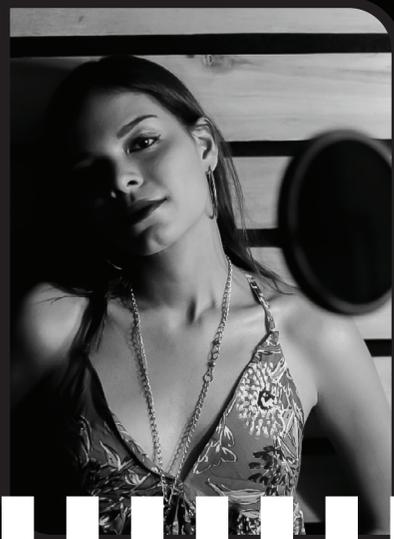
In those same post-performance discussions, I often paint the scenario of this director finishing the day of auditions and going out to dinner with

some colleagues, some of who are in the room. We have to remember that he's not alone in that room; he's got people sitting there with him for whom he is performing, for whom he is auditioning, watching the choices he makes. He's supposed to be the guy in authority. How does he handle this? It's as if someone were challenging you in your classroom. How do you deal with that? If you do the wrong thing and the kids see it, the respect they have for you might be attrited. All that is on the table. The director leaves and says, "Can you believe that guy? Have you ever seen anything like that? It's like, what was he thinking? How did he think that was gonna get him the job?" He goes on like that through dinner and the next day he's talking to his colleague and he says, "Yeah, there was this guy. I just keep thinking about this guy" and at some point somebody says to him, "And you didn't cast him. You can't get him off your mind because that was your Othello and you let him go. That's on you."

WN: I love that. That scenario also connects back to that earlier passage when the actor thinks to himself, "pick the actor that scares you the most."

KHC: That's one way it could have gone or that fellow could have gone home, exercised—as inadvertent and subconscious as it is—every iota of his white privilege, and gone back to his life, done his thing, been the boss, cast his show, made his three-to-five-week rehearsal process of the play, put it on stage, got paid, and was done. On to the next thing he's going to do. That's a possibility as well. But it's not my job to tell you what it should be. That you can run through all of those possibilities after having read it means that we did it right.





The Beauty of Words in the Texts of Vanessa Manzano

La Belleza de la Palabra en los Textos de Vanessa Manzano

by John Allen

Vanessa Manzano is, first and foremost, a singer; however, she is not defined and restricted by the noun *singer*. As a writer of prose, poetry, and lyrics, she is passionate and sensitive to the human condition. She is introspective and a keen observer of the natural world. She is a searcher in ways that go beyond easy explanation; this informs her musical choices. I came upon her music through a song she composed and recorded with her husband, the multi-instrumentalist Jorge Herrera. Together they are recording an album titled “Fuerte y Claro” (“Loud and Clear”), a collection of songs that can best be described as Latin music: salsa, rumba, bolero, and more. In this interview, I am focusing on Vanessa Manzano the solo artist. When I came upon her YouTube channel, I was captivated by her composition “Mi Vera.” This wide-ranging, profoundly personal conversation is centered on “Mi Vera,” and “Volvé” as well as “Luna Tucumana,” a song made famous by one of her musical role models, Mercedes Sosa. These three songs get at the heart and soul of Vanessa Manzano.

John Allen (JA): Where do you and your husband, Jorge Herrera, and your son, Nicolas, live, and what were your earliest memories and musical inspirations?

Vanessa Manzano (VM): We live in Cali, Colombia. We are both from the area, having grown up in Colombia, where beautiful landscapes and great music have surrounded us, primarily salsa, which is arguably the national music form. As a young girl, I was surrounded, at home, by a large extended family; music was a given. Personally, I began to gravitate towards Argentine music due to its density of form and its rich content. The music I heard from Argentina was rich in guitar sounds. The lyrics drew me in, as well as vocal interpretations. All the elements of the music, especially the feeling...there is so much feeling! That was and is something that I related to and continues to resonate with me today. It was something that spoke to me; it was inside me.

When I was young, my dad listened to many singers, including Italian singers and many from Spain, such as Camilo Sesto. It is music that is well-thought-out in terms of the arrangements and compositions. Many of the ballads sung in European romance languages can be traced to the Italian style, to the Italian influences. Many songs had versions in both Italian and Spanish, which significantly impacted me. It was

very dramatic, and I believed that listening to these singers in this style, which was very virtuosic, was something I wanted to do in the future. Its imprint is still in me and in my musical and personal DNA. And yet, I was only about seven years old, perhaps even younger, but I already knew what I wanted to do. I also listened to Salsa because it was omnipresent, ubiquitous, and inescapable. I also came upon the music of Mercedes Sosa (ed note: she was an influential, really famous Argentine singer, perhaps the emblematic Argentine singer, along with Carlos Gardel). She was who I wanted to be. She was so important in my life at that time. There were other great singers, such as José José; when I listen to him, it brings back memories of when I used to gather my dad's cassettes and play them on his cassette player. I would listen to them all afternoon.

Also, Camilo Sesto. Very majestic and almost ceremonious music, *muy solemne*, and that is the essence of Latin American music, how the lyrics are written, how they are sung. The ballads have a very aesthetic quality; everything must sound beautiful. The music is a part of the anatomy of the singer. Some types of music, such as rock, deforms the voice. Do not get me wrong; I am not criticizing rock music and rock singers; what they do is in the service of the form. It is a different thing altogether. So, the music I was drawn to and that I listened to made me want to sing aesthetically, in a *bello* (beautiful) way. With all the information I was gathering and internalizing, that was becoming a part of me, and I was inspired to compose music in that style. My compositions can be melancholic, and I try to convey images and imagery. I believe that the person who listens to my songs perceives this, the images.

I try to create a visual with the words I select...the people, such as Silvio Rodriguez and Mercedes Sosa, were figures who were very important in



Vanessa Manzano in the studio

my development as a composer and a songwriter. Another great inspiration of mine was Marta Gomez-I was obsessed with her. She is a soprano (I am a mezzo-soprano). With Mercedes Sosa, I had to go higher (with the tone and register of her songs), at least on some of her songs, but with Gomez, there was a limit; it wasn't comfortable for me to sing some of her songs, so I had to sing the songs in a lower tone, and sometimes I felt that songs kind of lose some spirit, they lose some essence, so I decided to enjoy her music from the perspective of the composition. Marta Gomez was very prolific; she wrote hundreds of songs. She is from Cali, where I live, then she went to Bogotá, and eventually to Berkeley, where she graduated with honors. She is a very, very, very good singer;

she and I have different and distinct styles. She uses various rhythms - Afro-Peruvian, Bolivian, and Colombian, to name a few. She has a socio-musical repertoire, and at times she “rescues” sounds that are or are almost extinct, sounds that are not heard anymore. When I began to write my first song, she was like a shadow over my shoulder; she was right there (Vanessa points to her right shoulder). I wanted that trajectory, not to write like her, not to imitate her, but to be able to do what she did: write her own music, her own lyrics. I wanted to develop my style. I could not, when I was younger, sing even 10 of her songs, which is good because it meant I could develop my unique singing and writing style. Marta became my reference not so much as a singer but as a composer. What I needed from her was to understand that I should and could write songs.

JA: How would you characterize your singing style?

VM: My voice is really particular. I cannot deform it to be another person, and I do not want to do that, anyway. I can imitate accents when I speak, I think, but not as a singer. Some people are good at it; they dress the part, they sing the part, they become the person. They are good at impersonating others and that is great; I accepted that I could not change my voice. When I sing a specific type of song, or a song written and performed by someone else, I have tried to sing it their way, but I cannot, and I am not good at that. Certain anatomical “things” impede me from singing like someone else, which I appreciate because it works in my favor in that I have developed my style. My voice does not sound like hers, or hers, nor hers. And whenever I select a song, I do it intentionally, based on the lyrics and the content, and it must resonate with me as a person. There is a link, a process of identification with me. One of my voice teachers inculcated in me the idea of not sounding like anyone else, being true to my voice and sound, and using my anatomy to the best of my abilities.

My voice is deep. The characteristics of my voice had to be and must be applied, not those of someone else. I concentrate on myself. This woodshedding process has helped me a lot.

JA: How would you feel if someone imitated your voice?

VM: (After a pause and with a smile). It would be a compliment.

JA: But your voice is unique and therefore challenging to imitate...

VM: I am not sure, but some do not honor their voice but instead sound like others. Some imitate José José, to give just one example. They can adapt their voice; I admire them for it. But it is, again, something I cannot do.

Regarding my approach to singing, I am a perfectionist (for better or worse). And I get frustrated when I do not achieve what I set out to do. My voice is in the mid-range, with good deep sounds, whole body, again, in the middle, as many singers are. I would not say that my voice is bright, and I feel that I need to add more *brillo* (treble). When I sing salsa, salsa asks for *brillo*.

When I sing a Mercedes Sosa song, I try to equalize, not by using technology, but by using myself and my body. I can sing with different colors...before, my voice used to be “darker,” but now it is brighter, and I can manipulate my voice as needed.

JA: Who are your musical role models?

VM: My first real musical role model was Mercedes Sosa. She is my first musical language, my musical mother tongue, in Spanish, *mi lengua maternal musical*. Because it was a very maternal voice that she had that grabbed me as a young girl. The phrase is attributed to the renowned Argentine pianist Daniel Barenboim. It is the expression of a language. So, in a musical sense, it is the same, an expression via music. And this was my mother tongue, which is also embodied in Latin American music.

Mercedes and Silvio Rodriguez. Silvio is a significant composer, as is Serrat (Joan Manuel). Not all singers are composers; some are. Another musical role model of mine is Liliana Montes, a fantastic singer, and I recommend you look her up. She lives here in Cali, and I have often seen her perform. I am very fortunate to be able to speak with her and to meet up with her to talk about singing. More than a singer, she has the profile of an artist. No particular musical genre defines her. Another singer is one whom I stopped listening to for a while; (there comes a point when I get obsessed with a particular musician, and I over-listen to them, so I stop). This is the case with Mónica Salmaso, from Brazil. She is one of my favorites; she just is crazy unbelievable. The lyrics of her songs, the harmonies, the musicians who accompany her, everything about her approach is impeccable, perfect. She moves me; she is complex and poetic. She could elect to follow any more straightforward process, but that is not her.

Marta Gomez is *really* important – she, too, is poetic. She has an album of musicalized poems by Federico Garcia Lorca; one is about the transformation of a dried-out tree, who is asking for the woodcutter to cut him up. The moon and the scenery play a huge part in his works.

Other incredible singers who are my musical role models include Omara Portuondo, a great Cuban singer, and Ella Fitzgerald.

JA: Do you know the story of Ella and Marilyn Monroe?

VM: Yes, of course. The whole segregation thing was sad. Strange Fruit. There is this song called “Strange Fruit.”

JA: Yes, Billie Holliday...

VM: I recorded it with Alfredo Linares. It is not yet available. But I will share it with you as soon as I have it ready.

JA: Thanks.

VM: *Claro*, that type of song, its lyrics, so crazy.

Another musical influence is Juan Iñaki, an Argentine from the province of Cordoba, northwest of Buenos Aires province and south of Tucumán. He is...wow...and he has a song titled “Aromas,” which was a musical inspiration for my song “Mi Vera.”

“Aromas” has this light (Vanessa looks upward, smiles wide, and moves her hands and arms expressively, emphasizing her admiration for this song). So, I am moved to write by certain things that I hear, that I

feel, that bring me a particular sensation; what I write comes from our shared experiences and the human condition. That is what I strive to capture; perhaps I do, perhaps not, but this is what attracts me, the search for the words and music that conveys what I am experiencing.

JA: How did you come upon the song “Luna Tucumana,” and what or who motivated you to sing and record it?

VM: “Luna Tucumana” is a song written and often performed in the zamba, not samba, tradition. It was composed by Atahulpa Yupanqui (ed note: he was born Hector Roberto Chavero Aramburu; 1908-92. He was not only a musician but an ethnographer as well. He changed his name and chose a name that honored Inca kings. He often traveled to northern Argentina from his native Buenos Aires [province] to study the region and the people of the north, including Tucuman). He wrote “Luna Tucumana,” and the lyrics spoke of his solitude, narrow-mindedness, and desire for openness; he spoke of the valleys, the sugar cane festival, and the area’s traditions. He studied indigenous people (ed note: such as the Mapuche in his investigations). He came to see and understand how they revered the land, the Earth, and the plants:

Perdido en las cerrazones

Lost in the storm clouds

Quién sabe vidita por donde andaré

who knows, my love, whereabouts I may be

Mas cuando salga la luna, cantaré, cantaré.

But when the moon comes out,

A mi Tucumán querido cantaré, cantaré¹

*I will sing, I will sing, To my dear Tucumán,
I will sing, I will sing*

So, the narrator in the song is a person who is *desprovista* (devoid) of a true personal north, and that is how I often felt. I was a solitary child, content to listen and to learn music. In addition, I often look up at the moon, and I have studied its cycles,

En algo nos parecemos...¹

We are similar in something...

Its effects on the seas, the tide, and on us as people, women in particular. I have realized how it relates to my moods and my monthly menstruation cycle. I studied in a school called Cóndor Blanco, specifically in Kai Woman (Kai means mountain). We, as women, are more affected by the moon than men are. We are intimately affected.

I used to think that I was depressed, but through my studies, I realized that it was the moon’s changes, and since we are made up of water, and the moon affects water, it began to make sense. When this became an “aha moment,” I decided to revisit “Luna Tucumana.” I had heard Mercedes Sosa sing it, but now it was more personal and resonated with me. So, I knew I had to record it.

The song resonates with me in so many ways. First, as a child, I was attracted to Argentine music, as I mentioned previously. It also speaks to my reverence for the indigenous people, who revere the land, their customs, and their ways. This is reflected in the songs I choose to sing when interpreting works from others. But it is also in me and comes out in my songs and lyrics. I love prose; I love poetry. I try to conjure up images, allowing the power of the words to take over, to express feelings, beauty, and emotions. My own songs are deeply personal, and if one listens closely, one will have a mirror into my inner self.

I want to add something here. The indigenous people use a particular plant for its medicinal qualities. It is called Yagé (Ayahuasca). It is used in many Latin American countries, including Bolivia, Colombia, Chile, and Peru. It is a hallucinogenic that puts you in touch with your inner self and your inner demons. It is a trip that lasts for hours. I took it once. And when I woke up, I noticed the solitude that surrounded me, no one to my left, no one to my right, no one anywhere to be found. This solitude relates to the narrator in the song, and the song has left an indelible mark on me; it is a recurring theme and omnipresent in my mind. (By the way, it is also a “detox express.”)

JA: There are obvious differences between the more traditional versions of “Luna Tucumana” and your interpretation. Was this a conscious decision?

VM: The pianist Juan Carlos Gaviria and I did not rehearse prior to recording the songs on my YouTube channel (ed note: her channel contains several songs, including: “Tu Amor Me Hace Bien,” “Yo Vengo a Ofrecer mi Corazón,” “Zamba para Olvidar,” “Mi Vera,” and “Luna Tucumana.”) I decided that I wanted to record these songs with voice and piano. Mercedes Sosa, for example, also incorporated the piano within musical styles, such as the zamba, which relies on guitars. A typical zamba has a different rhythm and feel. By way of contrast, piano and voice can be very melancholic. Guitars are played with other colors. I did not think to include other instruments; Juan Carlos, while he is an expert piano player, is not steeped in the zamba tradition. So, I merely asked him to accompany me on these songs. Not only did I want to do a duo with him on “Luna Tucumana,” but on the other songs (in my channel). Juan Carlos studied the songs; these selections I had sung previously, so we did not need to rehearse. We simply went in to record and played each song straight through. If we heard something we did not like, we did not overdub; we did not rely on the editing process. We merely started again from the beginning and played to the end because we wanted to capture a moment, a feel, an organic whole. Recording this way was a challenge at the time, but it was a great experience, a watershed in my development as a singer.

A recording is not easy, and you must have a mastery of the lyrics. While I had the words in front of me, I knew the songs so I could sing them with feeling, emotion, and passion. Could this have been done better? Perhaps, but we set out to record the songs live in the studio and accomplished our goal. I sang as I sang, and he played as he plays, capturing the beauty of the lyrics. I tend to underline specific keywords or phrases to remind me of the importance of the emotional weight behind them. Every song, for me, has imagery, its scenery.

Each piece is different, and as such, it has a distinct atmosphere. Before this interview, I was writing a lyric that I felt was *chévere* (cool). When I compose as well as when I sing, I think of the scenery, of the light of the song. “Volvé,” as I will discuss, is dark, it is, in fact, devoid of light, and I am covered in the darkness. “Mi Vera” is white, yellow, and green. So, when I go to interpret it (sing it), I print out the lyrics and mentally place myself in the imagery of the song. Then when I finish singing it, I move on to the next, and the notes, the scenery, and the colors, allow me to change the chip in my mind, so I can now be within the next song. But before I move on to the next song, I allow the feeling and the emotion from the just completed song to linger, to let it breathe, and if I am singing before an audience, it gives them time to digest, to process what they just heard.

JA: You have an affinity for describing, in your texts, the human condition...

VM: My songs are about the human condition at a very personal and emotional level. I observe. And I look for what moves people and what it means to be alive. It is very important to be true to the experience I am living.

JA: I know, from listening to “Mi Vera” and “Volvé” that you are willing to be vulnerable in public; in other words, these are songs meant to be listened to by others and not kept in a private diary..”

VM: “Mi Vera” and “Volvé” are two of my most deeply nostalgic/poignant and personal songs. I wrote “Volvé” first, and it was cathartic. I was in mourning. “Mi Vera” came next. Despite being as sad and intense as this song is to me, there is still a sense, an aura, of light. My songs tend to evoke a color or colors in me. Some colors are more vivid and brighter than others. The colors are sometimes more in shades, perhaps somewhat vague, and open to interpretation.

<i>Yo que pensaba que estos años te irán llevando.</i>	<i>I used to think that all these years</i>
<i>Con los cafes, las tardes, las risas</i>	<i>Would make me forget you along with the coffees we had,</i>
<i>y nuestros días</i>	<i>The afternoons, the laughs, and our days</i>
<i>Sí yo pensaba que a tu ausencia sería silente</i>	<i>Yes, I thought that this absence would go silent,</i>
<i>Como el rio se lleva los peces con la corriente²</i>	<i>As the river's current takes the fish</i>

I have not yet recorded “Volvé.” But you have heard it (ed note: Vanessa shared it via WhatsApp). It is voice and guitar. When I record it, I will add other instruments. But the feel and the sense of longing, the poetry of the song, will remain intact. By the way, notice that the title is “Volvé,” not “Vuelve.” The command form *volvé* comes from the *voseo* form of the Spanish language as it is spoken in parts of Latin America, most prominently in Argentina but here in Cali, Uruguay, and Chile. Instead of using the more standard *tú* form to speak to someone, *vos* is used instead, and when it comes to the command form, *tú* uses *vuelve*, *vos* uses *volvé*. In the song, I am imploring her to return. Hence the title.

<i>Vos te fuiste</i>	<i>You left</i>
<i>¿Dónde estás?</i>	<i>Where are you?</i>
<i>Seguiste plena un largo caminar</i>	<i>You followed a long walk</i>
<i>Yo no vuelo</i>	<i>I do not fly</i>
<i>Me quedé en tierra firme y sin saltar³</i>	<i>I stayed on firm ground and not jumping over the edge</i>

VM: “Volvé” is the darker, more somber part of the two-song series. I wrote it after a certain amount of time had passed after the situation at the heart of the song occurred. “Mi Vera” is more nostalgic; it is more melancholic. I consider “Mi Vera” to be a “prettier” part of the mourning phase in terms of the music and the lyrics, starting with the major tone, and I believe it to be more poetic. That’s the chronology of the two

songs. The person I sang about was someone I thought would always be there for me for the rest of my life. I admit that the words are sparse.

Kjarkas, the emblematic Bolivian musical group— as I was composing “Volvé,” I thought of them and was inspired by the textures and colors of their sounds. It was a throwback to my childhood. I am always inspired by a color or a couple of colors. In many of their tunes, they use the *vos* form, not the *tú* form, when addressing a person directly in their songs.

JA: How do you manage to sing songs such as “Mi Vera” and “Volvé” without crying, being that these are two very heartfelt songs?

VM: Well, one of my voice instructors told me that you must learn not to cry, *not to cry*, even if that is what you are feeling. And you must then be able to move on to the next song, maybe to a different song, with a color that conjures up an entirely different mood. It is like when you are just starting as a singer. You are waiting to go on stage, but you are getting extremely nervous, to the point where you feel nauseous. As the singer, you must front the band and face the audience. You walk on stage and hear the trumpet players and the saxophone. Finally, you begin to sing, and the nerves start to vanish—the same thing when you sing a very intense, emotional song. You learn how to deal with it and move on. But wow, it is difficult when you are still learning all of this and how to control your emotions.

JA: Getting back to colors, what colors did you see when you wrote and recorded songs such as “Luna Tucumana,” “Soy el Bongó,” “Mi Vera,” and “A Yemayá?”

VM: In my imagination, I saw earthy colors and shadows in “Luna Tucumana.” In “Mi Vera,” I see bright white, yellow, and green. Regarding “Soy el Bongó,” red and black, black which represents strength, and “A Yemayá,” a mix of black and blue representing water, as Yemayá is the goddess of water in the Yoruba religion of Santería, which is widely practiced in Latin America.

JA: Do you have any live shows scheduled in the near future?

VM: Soon, in about three weeks, I will be performing here in Cali, and I am thinking of putting some prose in the middle of the concert. I did this about two and half years ago, right before when my son Nicolás was born. I chose musicalized poems and complimented them with some poetic songs and prose. Let me give you an example: I combined the three possibilities throughout the concert, which became a poetic recital, too. The words of the performance were heavy with poetry and images, and I organized the show in a rigorous, coherent order. As I mentioned, halfway through a song, I would begin to recite because I also write prose, so it was 70% sung and 30% recital of prose. They may not be actual poems, but they are writings, short stories, with a poetic language. One of those texts was “Le Olive Nere” (black olives), which actually had some lines in Italian (I studied the language several years ago). This text has everything to do with “Mi Vera” and also with “Lucia” by Joan Manuel Serrat. (In fact, I recently recorded with the pianist Alfredo Linares.

“Lucia” is not a poem nor is it a musicalized poem; it is just that Serrat’s work is pure poetry. So, what did I do? “Lucia” is not my song; it is his, though I wish it were mine, but it has everything to do with “Mi Vera,”

the black olive texts, so I put them together in the concert given the three of them a link. Serrat is a topline composer, I am not at his level, but in my overall theme, his song “Lucia” fits in perfectly.

I enjoy narrating, using poetic devices, and in a storytelling way. This comes from my dad, Eduardo Manzano, a renowned journalist here in Colombia whose writings were infused with prose; they were in the spirit and tradition of prose. He always taught me that events could be described using words that are beautiful in a certain sense. This motivated me as a young girl to follow in his footsteps in that regard, so much so that I had at one time considered being a journalist. I try to include elements of beauty, aesthetics, and literary devices, and much of it comes from my dad’s influence.

JA: Is linguistics a field that has influenced you in your texts?

VM: Linguistically speaking, I do not know what to say, except that I try to convey my thoughts using carefully selected words and phrases. I do my best to use words that are pretty. However, I can use colloquial words or phrases when called for, such as in my song “Volvé,” where I use the *vos* form, as we have discussed before. But even then, my choice of *vos* and not *tú* was difficult. I went back and forth, maybe yes, maybe no, should I? But in the end, I decided it was suitable for the song since *vos* is used here in Cali, so why not? When one composes music that does not have an apparent reference to something already written, it feels and sounds strange. Strange. It happens to me sometimes; when I compose, I ask myself, “do I, do I not”? Yes? No? In the end, I preferred the word *volvé* and not *vuelve*; it is very colloquial, and it is how we speak locally.

I can be very structured; that is what I am used to, hence my uncertainty as to whether I would record it. I wasn’t even sure if I would share this song with someone else. But in the end, you have to accept songs as they are; henceforth, the song is like it is. It is what I have to share with others. Perhaps some people will like it, others may not, and that is perfectly fine. I do not think the song, or its nature requires changes. It is okay to honor a song’s nature - it is how they come to light, to fruition, to being. Eventually, I shared it with a friend, and she sang it with me, but I felt strange, wondering what she would think and what her opinion was, and I was afraid to ask for it.

There is a lot of freedom with the language for expression in Spanish. As a composer, what I do when I write my songs, is prose-like, the aesthetics, the beauty - the words, the imagery, the poetry; yes, it has a lot in common with poetry. As a solo artist, when I compose, this is what I tend to do; this is what I try to achieve.



Vanessa Manzano is truly a creative, one who has a beautiful voice that allows her to sing ballads of longing, of *anhelo* (yearning). In addition, the coupling of voice and her sensibilities permit her to interpret, in a distinctly original fashion, many traditional compositions. Likewise, as evidenced by songs such as “Soy el Bongó” and “A Yemayá,” which are upbeat and energetic, and full of fun, she can get you up and dance. She is a writer of prose and poetry, as well as song lyrics. Vanessa appreciates the beauty of words in the texts that she creates in her inimitable fashion. There is diversity and seriousness in her texts. Listen to her songs, and you come away with a deep appreciation of the range of emotions and feelings that Vanessa Manzano is able to express. It is a thing of beauty.

Mi Vera

Yo que pensaba que el tiempo
curaba todo
Yo que querría pensar que el viento
arrastra todo
Yo que pensaba que el recuerdo sería olvidando
como las fotos del pasado
se van velando

Vermo no te has curado
Y yo soñando que vuelvas a habitar
La vera mía
Mi vera
Mi vera
Mi vera

Yo que pensaba que estos años te irán llevando
Con los cafes las tardes las risas
y nuestros días
Si yo pensaba que a tu ausencia
sería silente
Como el rio se lleva los peces
con la corriente

Vermo no te ha curado
Y yo soñando que vuelvas a habitar
La vera mía
Mi vera
Mi vera
Mi vera
Mi vera
Mi vera
Mi vera
Mi vera

By My Side

I used to think that time cured everything
I wanted to think that the wind swept everything
I used to think the memory would be forgotten just
as the photos of the past are faded by light

But no, no you have not been erased and I am
dreaming that you would return to be,

mi vera,
mi vera
Mi vera
Mi vera

I used to think that all these years would make
me forget you along with the coffees we had, the
afternoons, the laughs, and our days

Yes, I thought that this absence would go silent, as
the river's current takes the fish

Mi vera
Mi vera
Mi vera
Mi vera
Mi vera
Mi vera
Mi vera

¹Excerpt from "Luna Tucumana", by Atahulpa Yupanqui

²Excerpt from "Mi Vera," by Vanessa Manzano)

³Excerpt from "Volvé," by Vanessa Manzano)

Luna Tucumana

Yo no le canto a la luna
Porque alumbrada nada más
Le canto porque ella sabe
De mi largo caminar
Le canto porque ella sabe
De mi largo caminar

Ay, lunita tucumana
Tamborcito calchaquí
Compañera de los gauchos
Por las sendas del tafi
Compañera de los gauchos
Por las sendas del tafi

Perdida en las cerrazones
Quién sabe vidita, ay, por dónde andaré
Mas cuando salga la luna
Cantaré, cantaré
A mi Tucumán querido
Cantaré, cantaré

Con esperanza o con pena
En los campos de Acheral
Yo he visto a la luna buena
Besando el cañaveral
Yo he visto a la luna buena
Besando el cañaveral

En algo nos parecemos
Luna de la soledad
Yo voy andando y cantando
Que es mi modo de alumbrar
Yo voy andando y cantando
Que es mi modo de alumbrar

Perdida en las cerrazones
Quién sabe vidita, ay, por dónde andaré
Mas cuando salga la luna
Cantaré, cantaré
A mi Tucumán querido
Cantaré, cantaré

Moon from Tucumán

I don't sing to the moon
just because it shines
I sing to her because she knows
of my long walk.
I sing to her because she knows
of my long trek.
Oh, little moon from Tucumán!

Little Calchaqui drum,
Companion to the gauchos
in the Tafi trails,
Companion to the gauchos
in the Tafi trails.

(Chorus)

Lost in the narrow-mindedness
Who knows, my love, whereabouts I may be!
But when the moon comes out
I will sing, I will sing
To my dear Tucumán,
I will sing, I will sing, I will sing,

With hope or with sorrow,
In the fields of Acheral
I have seen the good moon
Kissing the reed field,
I have seen the good moon
Kissing the reed field.
We are similar in something,
moon of loneliness,
I go walking and singing
which is my way of shining.
I go walking and singing
which is my way of shining.



Stargazers by Rachel Coyne

REVIEW: *Conversations with Diane di Prima*

Edited by David Stephen Calonne.
University Press of Mississippi, 2022. 232 pp.
\$25.00.

Review by William Nesbitt

Calonne has written several books on the Beats including *Diane di Prima: Visionary Poetics and the Hidden Religions*, and he has edited other interview collections in the *Conversations* series with Beat and Beat-identified writers such as Allen Ginsberg and Gary Snyder.

Although di Prima explains, “I don’t like being called Beat . . . because it’s such a small percentage of all of my work,” that is the category readers and academics most commonly place her in. Beginning with her first book of poetry, 1958’s *This Kind of Bird Flies Backward*, expansions of the mystical *Loba*, the plain-speak-this-is-what-we-need-to-do-right-now directness and urgency of *Revolutionary Letters*, the sensationalized prose of *Memoirs of a Beatnik* (“we needed some money”), her vastly superior autobiographical *Recollections of My Life as a Woman: The New York Years*, to 2014’s poetry collection *The Poetry Deal* and beyond, di Prima created a body of work spanning styles, decades, and coasts as she migrated from New York to California.

These interviews cover a forty-year range and numerous themes such as making art a way of life, balancing the pleasure and call of writing with the family needs and financial concerns, living an aware and engaged life, rejecting the formality and oppressiveness of the academy—but embracing learning and teaching—as both a student and as teacher/faculty. Discussions of western and eastern religious and spiritual traditions, including what she terms the “hidden religions,” magic, alchemy, and divinatory practices such as the *I Ching* and Tarot interweave with aesthetic, politics, and poetics.

After giving a 1972 poetry reading in Vancouver, di Prima talks with *Grape* about astrology, social issues, and her published and unpublished writing projects. By the time of fellow poet Anne Waldman’s 1978 interview, di Prima had given birth to five children so topics also include raising children, the role or non-role of men in the family unit, how to be both mother and writer, writing rituals, the differences between independent publishers and large publishing houses, and poetic community. *Half Pint*’s 1988 interview explores “the relation of art, meditation, and magical practices.” Di prima shares her thoughts about the Beat label, Zen, visualization, and audience in her 1992 conversation with *Beat Scene*. A brief 1998 interview with *Whole Earth* focuses deeply on metaphor and imagery both as abstract concepts and within the context of *Loba*. An extensive 2010 *Verbicide* conversations details di Prima’s various teaching experiences, thoughts about older methods of publishing versus internet publishing, and her hopes to get her unpublished work in order. Di Prima passed in 2020, and it’s too bad there’s a gap between those ten years.

Calonne organizes the collection chronologically. *Conversations* begins with a list of books by di Prima also arranged by year of publication. An introduction and multi-page chronology of di Prima’s life follow. Interviews proceed in order of first published appearance. Each one begins with the names of interviewers, original publication information, and any introductory material originally included. A comprehensive index with subheadings forms the last major section. Invaluable to researchers, the index includes names, titles, and other keywords so it’s very easy to use and search for particular topics. Finally, each page of the main text conveniently displays a heading naming the interview or interviewers and listing the year. This collection could not be more navigable.

As critical studies of di Prima are scant relative to other Beats such as Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, and William S. Burroughs, these interviews are a much-needed addition to di Prima studies, especially since only five of these twenty interviews are currently available on the internet.

If comparing the printed versions in *Conversations* to what's available online yields an accurate representation of Calonne's method, *Conversations* transfers the original text, along with any introduction or biographical account, in full with a bare minimum of editorial changes. Take, for example, the *Verbicide* interview. Calonne fixes erratic capitalization and small reading mistakes. "My junk filter everyday has to take away messages from a group called 'Patriot' who would like me to go a teabag thing somewhere" makes two corrections and becomes "My junk filter every day has to take away messages from a group called 'Patriot' who would like me to go to a teabag thing somewhere." However, occasionally mistakes are introduced. Earlier di Prima says, "Women I knew would get killed, like I say in *Recollections*." *Conversations* renders that with a tiny error as "Women I knew would get killed, like a say in *Recollections*." Still, I can count the flaws I found on one hand, they are all small, and I wish I could proofread my work as well as Calonne proofreads his. In other passages, the changes are not about right and wrong, but stylistic choices. In that same interview, di Prima reasserts her skepticism of the higher education industry: "But I haven't changed my opinions at all about academe. In fact, I think it's gotten a lot *worse* than it used to be, and all these MFA programs are just like *mills* for making money for the university; they're *horrible*." *Conversations* copies the wording of the passage exactly but without the italics. *Readers can decide for themselves if that change is better, worse, or just different.* Ultimately, we are getting the best available versions of these interviews grouped and organized in one place.

Not everything is here. Other excellent interviews with di Prima may be found, for example, in *San Francisco Beats: Talking with the Poets* and *Breaking the Rule of Cool: Interviewing and Reading Women Beat Writers*, but you will not find a single source with more di Prima interviews than *Conversations*.

I appreciate that Calonne does not edit the interviews for what might be considered redundancies in the record. For example, we read multiple accounts of di Prima's experiences visiting Ezra Pound while he was incarcerated in St. Elizabeths Hospital for treason. Elsewhere, she shares her memories of her first encounters with poetry, early life in New York, and influence of her grandfather more than once. However, each telling gives us new information, details, and nuances. I don't want an editor deciding which version is the best one for me. I prefer getting it all and deciding for myself.

This collection may not be for your average reader. Those interested in di Prima and the Beats, serious students of poetry working on their craft, and outsiders trying to center their lives around art and writing will learn the most from a writer who demonstrated that "once you're committed to an engagement, whether it's with poetry or politically, there is no place to go but the fire."

REVIEW: *The Sum Total of My Mistakes*

Grote, Dan.

The Sum Total of My Mistakes.

Between Shadows Press, 2022. 12 pp.

\$5.00.

Review by Erin O'Neill Armendarez

In his first chapbook, Grote presents twelve poems, some of which had been previously published in small literary magazines. These poems represent a good introduction to his poetry for a very reasonable price. Grote's poems touch on themes of despair but also on the theme of the poet's life, work, and experience. His poems are tightly crafted, for the most part in stanzas of three or four lines that rely heavily on sensory image, dark humor, and metaphor, all delivered with sharp syntax that often operates on a sort of rhythmic parallelism, as in these lines from "12/24/16":

Another Christmas Even in prison,
A whole sock drawer full
Of coal.

Reading Sylvia Plath by the
Lights of a gun tower,
And wondering

If someday I'll take a
Peek in the oven, just a tad
Too long.

The lines are quiet, simple language, simple images, yet the surprises resonate toward the theme of quiet despair and the contrast between a rich inner world and the stark realities of imprisonment. Grote does his best not to degenerate into the maudlin or sentimental. There is the occasional cliché, but for the most part, these poems are compelling in that they, though quite spare, invite readers into the life, mind, and world of an incarcerated artist.

In "Go West Old Man," Grote plays on the iconic phrase attributed to Horace Greeley, proclaiming in the first stanza with a nod to Carl Sandburg's "Chicago," "I'm through with this city/big shoulders that have shrugged/me off." It is clear that Grote is more than a dilettante. He has read his fair share, confessing an admiration of Charles Bukowski in a couple of different places. He has honed his craft. He is a poet, and aspires to be more widely recognized as such.

In his poem "Shut Not Your Doors/Don't Lock 'Em Either," Grote's narrator makes an appeal for inclusion:

Could be, I'm pounding sand at the beach
But proud library, patient reader,
Shut not your doors to me.

He repeats this toward the end of the poem:

Shut not your doors to me

Proud library, but save me
A spot on your shelf. . . .

Throughout this collection, Grote touches again and again on a common theme, the desire to be heard, the desire to commingle with the more recognized, more widely popular voices of his time and of the past. Occasionally, he breaks the well-known rule concerning the occasional capitalization of nouns for emphasis, something we find in the poems of Coleridge and Dickinson, but seldom since. I respect this choice, as it is clearly a choice, one consciously made by the poet. Poets, whoever we are, need a bit of caginess to protect us from the harshest of critics. A little hard-headedness is a good thing so long as it doesn't keep us from listening to constructive criticism, and it is apparent Grote has been listening.

This little book is hand-crafted; it comes from another small press working tirelessly to offer readers voices that may have been overlooked in the larger, more familiar venues. It represents the thriving work of underheard poets everywhere. Why not go online and purchase a copy? For your five dollars, you might even get a complementary mini-chapbook and a bookmark that comes with your purchase. I did. What a pleasure it was to remove it from the package, a handmade bookmark from another small press. If you buy Grote's book, and you find merit in it, why not email him?

At the end of his book, Grote admits, “. . . It gets very lonely locked away with your demons inside of a six by nine cage.” He will not be able to check for messages himself, but hopefully someone else will take up that important duty to let him know his work is appreciated, and that he is more than “the sum total” of his mistakes.

The Antidote to Silence: Just Mercy

With the shocking violence at the U.S. Capitol Building on January 6, 2021, and the protesters standing outside the Supreme Court waving signs following the recent reversal of the landmark decision on *Roe vs. Wade*, it is hard to imagine any such thing as silence from any faction in the U.S. With the Me, Too movement, Black Lives Matter, and national coverage on the plight of refugees attempting to cross our borders, we might kid ourselves into believing that every voice is heard, at least on some social media platform somewhere. Watching the news, reading the papers, or scrolling through the news online, we might be convinced that we know too much already about what is going on in our world, too many competing voices, too many hopeless problems with no readily available solutions. We can't keep active shooters out of our schools; we don't even have enough baby formula for all the infants in our nation—best to unplug, take a deep breath, and enjoy a mental health day.

It can be overwhelming: who do we give our donations to? Who do we help? Should it be the unwanted kittens in the shelter, the hungry families waiting in line at the foodbanks, the endangered lions, tigers, and elephants in Africa, the refugees of the war in the Ukraine, or the starving people in Sudan? We can become numb, stunned by all of the need in our world competing for our empathy, our dollars, our help. Yet there is, right here in our nation, a disturbing silence concerning the number of people incarcerated today. Maybe it's time we all paid a bit of attention. According to Bureau of Justice statistics, 1,182,200 men, women, and children were locked away in prisons in the U.S. in 2020, yet not all of them deserved to be there. Bryan Stevenson, founder of the Equal Justice Initiative (EJI) and author of the book *Just Mercy* (originally published in 2014), has for decades worked tirelessly along with an impressive cadre of lawyers and other professionals to be sure that the most vulnerable of those incarcerated, those who have been unjustly convicted, those who have received excessive punishment, those who never got competent representation, have a voice in our system. We may have not made a deliberate contribution to the inequity, but those of us who pay taxes in the U.S. are funding the most expensive prison industry in the civilized world. Unknowingly, we may be electing politicians who deliberately create fear and anger in voters, garnering support for a criminal justice system that is, all too often, unfair in its treatment of way too many of the accused. Do you know who we are locking away, and why? If you do not yet know, I invite you to read on.

I discovered the work of Bryan Stevenson one afternoon not long ago when I was driving through the mountains of New Mexico. It was a long drive, so I wanted to listen to something. I can't remember if I'd found a podcast, or whether I was listening to NPR, but I'd stumbled upon an interview that seemed interesting. It was Bryan Stevenson explaining in heart-breaking detail the horror faced by Charlie, a fourteen-year-old in an adult holding facility. I listened intently as Stevenson gave voice to this boy's nightmares after being raped repeatedly by other inmates. He had already suffered the trauma of seeing his mother brutally beaten to the point of unconsciousness; after Charlie had shot and killed his mother's abuser, the criminal justice system wanted to treat him like an adult. As an educator and an advocate of at risk and underprivileged teens, how could it be I had not yet discovered Bryan Stevenson and the EJI? Perhaps I had heard of it. I had heard of the National Memorial for Peace and Justice, which opened in 2018 in Montgomery, Alabama.

I was encouraged to see the museum open, having already read Ida B. Wells-Barnett's *The Red Record*. Having taught at universities and two-year colleges in Louisiana, Arkansas, and Georgia, I knew that black students were all-too-familiar with this record, which had been handed down to them through oral history. Some of them even shared horrific stories with me one-on-one in the privacy of my office. At the same time, many of my white college students at the University of New Orleans really seemed convinced that most slave owners were good to their slaves and that lynching was rare and most likely deserved. One strange day while teaching Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, I assured students that the type of cruelty depicted in this novel had in fact been inflicted time and again on slaves, and there was historical record to document this fact. It seemed inane: the novel held more truth than they had ever learned in a history class. When I insisted that Morrison had not distorted the truth, I heard a deep voice from the back of the room, "Git a rope." While I was teaching that class, Bryan Stevenson and the staff of the EJI were defending the rights of the citizens in the states where I lived day and night. Why hadn't I ever heard of them?

Bryan Stevenson, who has won more awards than I can mention here, is one of those rare activists who has given his career, his talents, and essentially his life to the under-represented, to those who have been overlooked by a nation that assumes our criminal justice system doles out equal justice to all. He really believes in what he is doing, hopeless as the cause seems sometimes. He asks compelling questions: is it necessary for our system to inflict further violence and abuse on a 14-year-old simply because he has committed a serious crime? As I listened to Stevenson's kind, humble assertions, to his vivid description of the boy's shock and his uncontrollable shaking, the answer seemed pretty simple: No. We should do our best to be sure such things never take place in our prisons. Why hadn't I heard of this before? I wondered as I drove along that afternoon.

In *Just Mercy*, Stevenson gives voice to the stories of an alarming number of poor people, men and women, black and white, erringly left on death row to be executed. He tells the stories of the cases he and the EJI won, but also, he unflinchingly describes right down to the moment of lethal injection the inhumane punishment inflicted on convicts whose cases he lost. He tells the stories of mentally ill defendants who never received their rights according to the law. Through his recreation of character and dialogue, we are able to see these convicts from Stevenson's eyes, eyes of compassion, eyes of humanity. We hear their dialect, laugh at their jokes. We see the irony of a death row prisoner's gratitude for a failed attempt to save his life against the backdrop of an aloof, vindictive system that can't be bothered to read the facts of his case with interest, or to put his life above some petty protocol or perception. Could this really happen in contemporary America? Yes, it can happen. And it does.

Chapter 15 is particularly compelling, as it describes Stevenson's frenzied schedule attempting to stay a number of unjust executions, flying from state to state in coordination with his EJI staff, doing his best to prevent what many countries consider to be a barbaric form of punishment for anyone, let alone a juvenile, a mentally disabled person, or a person who has not yet received competent representation, or the fair trial guaranteed by the laws on the books. Chapter 15 focuses on the case of Jimmy Dill, who had shot someone after an argument during a drug deal. Dill was initially charged with aggravated assault, as the man he shot didn't die. Unfortunately, this man did die several months after the shooting, most likely of neglect from his caretaker. Dill's charges were changed to capital murder. An addict who had been sexually and physically abused during most of his childhood, Dill did not receive adequate counsel in

what amounted to an exceedingly high stakes situation. He never knew the state had offered him a chance for a guilty plea deal, so he ended up sentenced to death. From Stevenson, we discover that the cases we thought were rare, the ones where people receive unjust sentences, where no one actually investigates the facts of a case, the ones where constitutional guarantees are not delivered, the ones where DNA evidence is deliberately destroyed before it can be used to vindicate the innocent, happen all too often to the poor, the addicted, the mentally ill, and to minorities in the U.S. These atrocities are not lost in the distant past; they occur every day while we are drinking our coffee and going about our business.

Stevenson clearly points out why Dill should never have been sent to death row. In a capital case, intent to kill must be proven, but no such intent was proven in Dill's case. At the end of the day, this didn't seem to matter. Dill had a severe intellectual disability, and the Supreme Court had banned execution of people who are mentally disabled, but this didn't help Dill either. After exhausting every possible legal venue, Stevenson was left with no option but to call his client immediately before the scheduled execution to deliver the bad news. Dill would be executed by lethal injection within the hour.

Alone in his office during the execution, Stevenson struggled to make sense of the court's decision. Realizing there should be some penalty for shooting a man, but that the death penalty was beyond excessive in this case, he began to wonder: "Why do we want to kill all the broken people? What is wrong with us, that we think a thing like that can be right?" (288). European manufacturers no longer sell the chemical used for lethal injection to the U.S.; member nations of the European Union do not believe that it is just to kill a man who has committed a crime under any circumstance. To unevenly deliver such a penalty, inflicting the worst upon people who have in many cases already suffered extreme abuse and neglect during childhood, people who have lived most of their lives in poverty, people who are mentally disabled—Europeans simply do not believe it is conscionable, case closed. I had a German student a few years back in an independent study literature class. The novel he read was *Native Son*. He chose to write his research paper on the inhumanity of the death penalty as it is practiced in the U.S. This student, trusting me to help him to understand, wanted to know why so many Americans are convinced that the death penalty is necessary. Unable to understand it myself, I couldn't explain it to him.

During that terrible hour, as Dill was being executed, Stevenson thought about giving up, turning away, saying to himself, "I can just leave. Why am I doing this?" In deep reflection, he realized he wasn't representing these clients simply because it was important, but because he himself was also broken. He saw that through the brokenness of his clients, through their suffering, through their anguish, his own brokenness was revealed (289). Further, he understood that to be broken is to be human, that we all are broken in some way (289). In wanting to separate ourselves from the brokenness in others, in attempting to locate this brokenness outside of ourselves rather than seeing it within ourselves, we turn away from the accused, innocent or guilty, inflicting the harshest of punishments upon them. Instead of summoning our compassion, or recognizing our common humanity, we respond with fear, with anger. We deny mercy where it is warranted.

To Stevenson, our common humanity is denied when we allow the Jimmy Dills of the world to be killed, calling it justice. He observes, "So many of us have become afraid and angry. We've become so fearful and vengeful that we've thrown away children, discarded the disabled, and sanctioned the

imprisonment of the sick and the weak—not because they are a threat to public safety or beyond rehabilitation but because we think it makes us seem tough, less broken” (289). Stevenson’s own grandfather was murdered by teens in the projects of South Philadelphia, yet he still defends teens who have committed similar crimes, acknowledging that science had proven teens are not yet fully developed, hence their choices cannot be viewed in the same light as those committed by adults. Yes, they have committed crimes and need to be held accountable. This doesn’t mean they need to be thrown away permanently with no chance of rehabilitation.

If you haven’t yet read *Just Mercy*, originally published in 2014, I highly recommend it. You’ll come away wondering if all the statistics Stevenson cited remain true today in terms of the number of wrongful convictions and systemic inequities for people of color and for the poor. The book was made into a movie in 2019 and that film is, as I write, available on Netflix.

If you go to the EJI’s website, you will find recent statistics and information on mass incarceration, racial justice, and public education. If you log onto the website of the Death Penalty Information Center (DPIC) in Washington, DC, you’ll discover that, while the number of executions each year has decreased, there are still 2,500 or so prisoners awaiting execution on death row in the U.S. The EJI’s website acknowledges considerable success in overturning bad sentences and convictions of the innocent, yet they maintain that “America needs a deeper and broader narrative shift to move from mass incarceration into an era of truth and justice: we need to honestly confront our history.” In his speech upon receiving the 2020 Right Livelihood Award, a Swedish award international in its scope, Stevenson explains that in order to heal our criminal justice system and our society, to give voice to the silent, we need to change our narrative of race from one of fear and anger to one that truly acknowledges the degree of racial inequity that has been present since our nation’s inception. This is not about blame, as he explains it. It’s about our inability to tell the truth openly and communally, to incorporate this truth into our shared understanding, into the art and memory reflected in our public spaces, where our consistently agreed-upon values are honored. This inability to come to terms with the truth inhibits our ability to heal. In this same speech, Stevenson reminded his audience of the U.S.’s genocidal activity against indigenous peoples, and of the horrific history of lynching post-Reconstruction, which, as he points out, black people remember as nothing less than terrorism. He pointed out the shift in power that occurred in Germany after the Nazis were defeated. There are no remaining monuments to Hitler or to the Nazi party in public spaces in Berlin. Instead, there are memorials to their victims, and an open, communal commitment to the idea, “Never again.” Germans abhor the death penalty. This is because Germans fully understand the horror of inhumane punishment. They understand how harmful it is to an entire society and not just to those upon whom it is inflicted.

Many will say from the far corners of our society, “Enough. I’m tired of hearing about it. All of those things occurred decades, centuries ago.” But Stevenson makes a compelling case in implicating our nation’s inability to fully acknowledge our past, to admit the injustices and wrongdoings, as the root cause of our current civil unrest and brokenness. He argues that truth and justice are sequential: there must be a reckoning with truth before justice can emerge.

Stevenson is an inveterate storyteller, one gifted with eloquence, graced with unusual empathy. He has tirelessly defended the basic rights of those worst impacted by the uneven distribution of justice in the U.S. In his TED talk in 2012, Stevenson said “The opposite of poverty is justice. You judge the character of a society. . . by how they treat the poor, the condemned, the incarcerated.” He blames the war on drugs and its narrative of fear and anger, exploited by politicians running for office, for the mass incarceration currently existing in our nation. Once convicted, newly released prisoners find that they have lost any number of rights and services available to others, for example, the right to vote in an election, or the right to qualify for food stamps or public housing in some cases.

Spend a little time with Stevenson, and he will introduce you to a lengthy line of American citizens accused of crimes they didn’t commit. He’ll show you trial after trial where the accused never received the fair trial our system guarantees. Most of their stories will never make the evening news. Some of them will be incarcerated for the rest of their lives. Others may find themselves strapped to a gurney awaiting lethal injection after the sound facts presented upon their behalf have been ignored by the highest courts in our land. It is not pleasant, in fact, it is even frightening, to contemplate such realities. But if we are not willing to shine the light into these dark places, we will not ever be able to assure “liberty and justice for all.”

Like me, I’m sure you do your best to promote fairness and equity in your community. These are American values that most of us respect and treasure. But to a large degree, we are shielded from, distracted from, and to some degree numb to the forced silence of those locked away in our prisons, hoping that our system is for the most part fair, telling ourselves there’s nothing we can do. The thought is overwhelming. How could we possibly address all of the suffering and unfairness faced by the people accused in *Just Mercy*, let alone all of those who have suffered a similar fate before or since? We can’t be responsible for corrupt or aloof courts, or the lack of funding. But maybe we all have a part to play in changing the narrative. It is, of course, unwise, to break out the topic at Thanksgiving Dinner among members of an already polarized family. That is not recommended, as it is apt to cause further entrenchment and no positive change. It is much easier to tout our own ideas than it is to listen with attention and compassion to an opposing viewpoint. Maybe what we need more than anything is to listen. In Chapter 10 of his book, Stevenson recalls a white correctional officer in a southern prison who forced him to succumb to an invasive strip search before allowing him to see his client. This officer was clearly a Confederate sympathizer, a racist with an axe to grind, yet he found some empathy for Stevenson’s client when he heard that he had suffered for most of his childhood in the state’s foster care system. The officer had been raised in the same deeply flawed system and had had similarly rough experiences in foster homes. This caused him to connect his own brokenness with that of Stevenson’s client. He heard the courtroom expert expounding upon the damage done to kids in foster care, and at once realized the source of his own anger. He asked Stevenson if maybe he, too, had been done irreparable harm in the system. Stevenson replied by saying, “The bad things that happen don’t define us. It’s just important sometimes that people understand where we’re coming from” (201). That kind of healing, that kind of recognition, is possible, but only when people are open, receptive, listening, as the officer was that day in the courtroom.

At the close of his Right Livelihood Award lecture, Stevenson said, “Hopelessness is the enemy of justice. Hope is our superpower.” In these times, it is abundantly easy to lose hope, to turn away from the amount of suffering we see, to withdraw from the over-availability of media desensitizing us to the

disparities in our society, especially when we are struggling for our own stability in terms of our finances, our families, our personal health and well-being. But listening to Bryan Stevenson brings me hope. He attunes me to the voices I have not yet heard, the voices of my fellow citizens still struggling to obtain their basic rights. I encourage anyone with time and interest to go to the EJI website, to read Stevenson's book, to find his recorded lectures online, and to listen, to consider how our writing, our art, our votes, our dollars, and our agency are working to create a more perfect union for those yet unable to speak up, to sit at the table and to receive the bounty that many of us have enjoyed. Maybe the Horatio Alger myth is, for many, just that, a myth. Maybe what we don't see, what we don't hear, is diminishing us all.

In the "Author's Note" to the 2019 edition of *Just Mercy*, Stevenson invites readers interested in working with the EJI or in supporting its programs to contact the organization on its website at www.eji.org or through email at contact_us@eji.org. What can I do? I don't know. But I've decided to set aside a bit of time in a hectic life to explore the possibilities. If enough of us support equity and justice for all, things can only get better. How many of the incarcerated are being held in solitary confinement today? It's hard to get the exact numbers, but reliable sources estimated over 60,000 in 2018. Perhaps our voices could speak for them. There can be no harm in trying. It seems now may be a better time than ever before.





ARTFUL EXPRESSIONS IN CLAY

An Interview with Artist Shelley Schreiber

Shelley Schreiber, in studio with wet pot, photo by Suzi Moore

“After working part time in ceramics while I pursued a professional career in international relations, I became a full-time artist many years ago. It was a significant career change, with the accompanying joys and challenges of launching into a completely different way of life. In addition to my studio practice and active membership in a ceramics co-op, until recently I taught wheel throwing and was the ceramics studio manager at the Art Students League of Denver. I am now working on a new project as partner and director of a new studio called Continuum Art Studios, which provides studio space to artists and will help ceramic artists transition from a school environment to working on their own. I’m a Denver native and have lived in Chile, New York and participated in an artist residency in Japan, among other travels.” - Excerpt from <https://www.shelleyschreiber-art.com/>



Katie Redfield (KR): Can you tell us a little bit about yourself – where are you originally from?

Shelley Schreiber (SS): I was born and raised in Denver – third generation. I come from a family of six kids. I have a Bachelor’s Degree in Spanish and International Relations, and a Masters in International Studies, from CU Boulder and DU (University of Denver), respectively. I switched careers in the 90s to make art full time. I am mostly self-taught in ceramics, with a lot of workshops and years of practice under my belt.

KR: How did you get started in the arts and what mediums have you worked in?

SS: I got started in the arts in high school. Two of my teachers were influential in creating that interest. One was my ceramics teacher and the other was my drawing and painting teacher. I have taken classes in drawing, painting, pastel, watercolor and stone carving, but my primary medium has always been clay.



Thoughtful (top left), I See You (top right), Bending Over Backwards 2 (bottom)



Mise en place

KR: What medium are you mostly working in now?

SS: All clay – I work with both porcelain and stoneware at two different temperatures – cone 6 oxidation (medium fire) for sculpture and cone 10 reduction (high fire) for decorative/wheel thrown work. I like to make the distinction and not call my thrown work “functional” because my intent in making is that it be artistic, decorative and looked at the same way as any artwork on the wall, rather than being seen as a solely functional object.

KR: I read that you spent some time living in Chile, New York and Japan. Were those moves primarily art driven or part of your past profession in international relations?

SS: First, I lived in Mexico City for a year when I was in college. After I completed my bachelor’s degree, I worked as an intern on the hill in Washington, D.C. I lived in Chile two different times: the first was as an exchange student during my master’s program at DU. The second time, I returned to Chile to work for Unicef. While still working for Unicef, I transferred from Chile to New York. That part of my history was dedicated to my past profession in international relations. In Chile and New York, I practiced my art by working in different ceramics studios on nights and weekends. During my time in Japan I was an artist in residence at the Shigaraki Ceramic Sculptural Park.

*Covered jar (top)
Casserole (second from top)
Low tray (third from top)
Tray with Cream and Sugar set (bottom)*

KR: Can you speak to how those experiences shaped your current career? How did you come to the decision to move toward art full time?

SS: From the time I was in high school and deciding what to do in life, there was a pull in two directions for me – international studies and art. At the high school graduation decision making point, I decided to pursue the former, but as time went on there were both personal and professional reasons for taking a leap of faith and pursuing an art career. I moved back to Denver from New York to do this. It was an exciting and at the same time tough decision given the uncertainty of an art career and losing the expansive atmosphere in which I worked professionally. It is interesting that the question comes up about how those experiences shaped my current career, but I look at it differently. Those experiences shaped me as a person, but my career in the arts and what I make is an introspective endeavor. My references are internal and relate back to my core personality.

KR: As I understand it, you managed the studio for the Arts Student League in Denver. What kind of impact has that had on your work?

SS: I taught wheel throwing at ASLD for 16 years and managed the ceramics studio at ASLD for the final 10 years of my career there. I chose to teach to have interaction with other professional artists given that I work in a co-op studio with a limited number of people. I wouldn't say that my career there has impacted my artwork. I was impacted by interactions with students and other artists in both learning how to express myself so that other people clearly understand me and so that I am able to push beyond my introversion and share my knowledge with other people. It has also helped me to see and to learn how other people see and learn.

KR: Can you share with our readers how teaching has affected your own work?

SS: As I mentioned above, teaching hasn't so much affected my work as it helped me develop skills to be good at expressing concepts and techniques, supporting other people's goals and encouraging excellence. It took me a while to understand the



Abstract Nude (top & bottom)



Blue Celadon Teapot

level of people's interest and desires when they come to a community studio, how they learn and how to convey information so that they can succeed without fear or judgement. I respected where they were in the learning process. In terms of my own work, the visiting artists workshops we sponsored were inspirational and helped me along technically, as well as in seeing others succeed in their artistic careers.

KR: What are some of the challenges have you encountered as an artist? How have you overcome them or moved past them?

SS: There are many challenges as an artist. There are financial challenges – how to make a living and still stay true to what you love to do. There are challenges finding venues to show my work. There are artistic challenges – generating ongoing ideas to execute and being willing to sacrifice the known for the exploratory approach. There are the technical issues in clay – it can kick your butt and slap you around, reminding you to be humble. What you have in your mind may not always work physically in three dimensions and in the material or temperature you want to work with. I have lost work many times at the greenware stage and have had many firings where less than 50 percent of what I've made is successful coming out of the kiln. It has become important to not be too emotionally attached to a piece of work as it goes through the many stages of the making process. There are constant issues along the way that require a mindset of overcoming obstacles and trying ideas multiple times in order to succeed. I am persistent, which helps me achieve my artistic goals over the long term.

KR: In looking through your work, I'm impressed by how distinct your separate collections are and yet they all have in common elegant contours and a sense of a very disciplined restraint. Do you work on multiple projects at the same time or do you tend to complete a collection and move on from it?

SS: I tend to move back and forth between sculptural and wheel thrown objects, but you've hit on some basic concepts in my work that flow through all that I make. I am concerned about form over surface, minimalism, subtlety and refinement. Sometimes this is risky because the cleaner the lines, the more you invite the viewer to scrutinize the details. However, that is my nature and how I express myself. As I mentioned, I like to explore, with my collections evolving slowly over time, always approaching the work with an understanding of who I am as a person and how that is expressed.

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

SS: I want viewers to feel an emotional connection to the work and the harmony between physical materials, critical thinking and inner contemplation. I hope that it is intimate and strong and, for the sculptural work, that it evokes some questions about meaning.

KR: What is one of your favorite pieces you've ever created and why?

SS: One of my favorite pieces is called "Bending Over Backwards II" (page 47). It was a very challenging piece to create and it makes me think about and represents what women confront in their lives.

Another favorite piece is a blue celadon teapot (page 48) I made many years ago. It was the result of a long, incremental study making teapots while investigating proportion, assembly techniques, glaze formulation and firing.

KR: How do you usually share your work with others?

SS: I show my work on social media, my website and occasionally in shows or galleries.



*Wet Pot (top)
Yellow Mugs (middle & bottom)*

KR: Can you tell us a little bit about what you're working on now and how you got inspired for this latest series of work?

SS: I've been working on abstract sculpture, mostly abstract figures. I think it's a process that has been brewing for a long time. It does refer back to the same clean lines, and gesture, with a focus on form and a suggestion of the underlying meaning left for the viewer to interpret.

KR: Who are some of your mentors? What other artists inspire you?

SS: One of my mentors was my high school ceramics teacher. He was encouraging in a way that had very little to do with the technical aspects of clay, although he led me in the right direction in that arena. There are many artists that inspire me – mostly in the three dimensional realm. One of my favorites is Sueharu Fukami from Japan. I love Chris Staley's work, Bodil Manz and several artists that work in wood sculpture. I tend to be drawn to well-executed minimalist work and unusual, non-realistic figurative sculpture. Sometimes I like macabre figure sculpture. I appreciate really good, thoughtful, intimidating functional work. Peter Beasecker and Marty Fielding come to mind, as I see them blurring the lines between utilitarian and sculptural clay. And, I love looking at foreign artists on Instagram. Social media gives me access to a much broader world and I very much appreciate contemporary Japanese, Taiwanese and European ceramic artists.

KR: What do you find is the most rewarding thing about being an artist?

SS: Just doing what I love to do.

KR: What advice would you give to young artists just starting out and is there anything that you would like to share with our readers about living a creative life?

SS: I would probably say that they should go for it right away since it takes a long time to mature both artistically and technically. I would encourage them to fight the temptation to make what the public wants and stay true to their ideals and long term goals. They should be careful when they pick a path that it's the right one for them in the long run.

Living a creative life is not as glamorous as it seems, but it is worth living. We need support, acknowledgement and understanding of our work, our dedication and passion, along with who we are as human beings. We don't always fit the norm in society, and that is a good thing.



SEE MORE OF SHELLEY'S WORK

Website: <https://www.shelleyschreiber-art.com/>

Instagram: @sindsdenver



Writing Out of the Undertow

When I wake, the blankets are too heavy and the window is in the wrong place. I can't remember any of last evening. It's like I've had a concussion. No dinner? No movie or evening stroll?

But wait; does the clock say 8:30? Am I about to miss a breakfast tutorial with one of my students?

Alarmed, I roll out of bed and stumble over my pants, which are crumpled on the floor like shed snake skin. I lift the blind and see that the sky is all wrong—too faded, almost dark. Then I realize it is 8:30 pm, not am. Apparently I have slept only two hours, not fourteen.



For the past ten days, I have been at the Iowa Summer Writing Festival in Iowa City, leading back-to-back workshops for memoirists and trying to create a community where everyone feels free to share their most vulnerable experience then learns that memoir writing requires more than being vulnerable. There's no personal energy left. As a result, I feel unexpectedly relieved when I realize that I did not sleep through the precious "down-time" of this evening.

Free to relax, I slip back into bed and pile pillows so that I can read another chapter from Patricia Hampl's *A Romantic Education*, savoring her description of 1970's Prague, where the winding, unplanned streets and the fantastic jumble of stone buildings seem like a centuries-long dream that emerged out of Kafka's mythic mind, steeped in enigmatic history.

"Everyone seemed to have time to sit," she writes, "to smoke as if smoking were breathing, to stare into the vacancy of private thought . . . I'd finally arrived in my parent's decade, the men's soft caps, the dove colors of Depression pictures, the acquiescence to circumstance, the ruined quality. For the first time I recognized the truth of beauty: that it is brokenness . . ."

Listening to her narrate this long-past experience, I shiver at the deftness of her language. Hampl's is a landmark memoir that demands margin-marking. It is a beautiful, sad book that sings a timeless tune and leaves me pensive about lying in bed in the university town where I, fifteen years ago, arrived with my own myths and dreams, so determined to prove myself a writer.

As an MFA student at the University of Iowa, I once took a week-long special-topics class with Hampl, coming into the classroom each day like one of those devotees who studies under a revered zen master. I eagerly awaited my enlightenment—the charmed moment when I would glow with insight and levitate off my chair. I wanted, more than anything, to gain her approval.

To my amazement, Hampl was kind enough to grant me an interview for an article, and a year later, she agreed to write an endorsement for my thesis, which had been accepted for publication. Ecstatic, I emailed my parents: "It's as if some old-testament prophetess just laid her hands on me," I declared. However, to my horror, I got an email from Hampl only a few minutes later: "Did you mean to send this to your parents or me?"

Disturbed by that embarrassing memory, I close the book. I look to the window and see that the sky is dark except for a miniscule pinprick of light lifting straight up the middle of the frame—a tiny spark in the black square, lifting, lifting, then gone. Restless, I step into the crumpled pants on the floor, and I chomp some cold pizza that I've kept in a Styrofoam box. I splash my sleep-dusted face and adjust the matted cowlick. Then I go down the elevator and out into the night, where I mount a bike that I brought from home as a way to toodle around Iowa City.

It's night out here on the warm Iowa streets—with leisurely students walking hand-in-hand. As they stroll down the sidewalk, savoring 9:27 pm then 9:28, perhaps they feel little bits of the past fluttering behind them like torn yarn, but when I pedal past, I feel as if I am working upstream against the full undertow of memory. Recollections tug against me like the fishy luminescence that breaks off the prow of a night ship, and because so many of those memories involve melancholic yearning, I am perplexed. Why such sad nostalgia?

Almost a hundred years ago, Virginia Woolf haunted the nighttime streets of her beloved London. For her, going out of the house was a way to escape the past and its distracting associations. Once out the door, she shucked off the shell of her normal existence and became an enormous in-the-moment eye, ghostlike in the sense of being nearly invisible, out-of-body, simply happy to see and drift.

Hampl seems to have felt this release as well, while spending time on the streets of her beloved Prague: “I could sit, merely breathing, and be part of it. I was beautiful—at last. And I didn't care—at last.”

I, by contrast, find myself draping the muggy streets with wistfulness, transforming everything into a sadder version of itself. For instance, as I approach the main building where I used to study, I veil the blocky four-story structure with a gauze of quiet envy. I recall my diminutive classmate, Yiyun Li, who sat across from me during many a workshop, astounding us all with fantastical stories of childhood in pre-Tiananmen China. Our bottle rocket, I think as I roll past the brick entranceway, remembering how suddenly she shot into the literary sky, bursting out in a blossom of color: touted by the *New Yorker* as one of their “20 Under 40,” awarded 25,000 Euros for winning the Frank O'Connor International Short Story Award, given a MacArthur Fellowship. And me? Left earthbound, wishing (if I'm completely honest) that I had as much talent.

This is the sort of remorseful reminiscing that takes command of my inner eye, obscuring not only the English-Philosophy Building but the river and the concrete bridges that I ride across as I loop back toward downtown. In fact, as I climb the hill on Burlington Street, I am so caught up in lamentful remembering that I begin to co-opt other peoples' memories, clinging to what is most poignant. I reach The Mill, a local bar where legendary Raymond Carver nearly drank himself to death, and that squat shopfront reminds me of something Patricia Hampl once said while talking to a group of us about her personal mentors. As I recollect, when she entered the MFA program at Iowa, she ended up in a Carver workshop by accident—because no one else was signing up to study with the new “country yokel,” drawn instead to well-established John Cheever. She said Carver was kind and attentive, willing to talk over her writing independently but only if she reached him before lunch. After that, his midday drinking bouts turned him irascible and dull-witted—made him into something other than himself, or at least the self he would eventually become after years of Alcoholics Anonymous.

How fitting that, as I turn north on Linn street, I pedal over a sidewalk plaque where Hampl herself is memorialized by a quote from her book-length meditation on memory: *I Could Tell You Stories*. There, in front of the glass entrance to the Iowa City Library, I glide right over the brass letters: “Maybe being oneself is always an acquired taste.”



I ride more slowly now, feeling the warm breeze as I coast north on Gilbert Street, tracing the backside of downtown and shifting to a cobbled street that rumbles under approaching cars. Porch lights glow. Young people are out in clusters, swigging beer, probably avoiding the oven-like interiors of their un-airconditioned apartments.

I turn west with my little headlight illuminating an oval of cobbled bricks, and when I have pedaled a few more blocks, I glide past the famous house that serves as a center for the Iowa Writer’s Workshop, all aswirl with literary wraiths: Flannery O’Connor, Robert Lowell, Carver, Cheever, plus a host of living writers whose famous personas mingle in, crown-like, around the gabled roof—John Irving, Sandra Cisneros, Hampl, and the rest.

Looking at the Dey House, as it is called, I am still too affected by my nostalgic projections to appreciate it for what it is: a simple clapboard structure with dressed-up metal porch posts and predictable eaves. I cloak it with more of my regretful, blue-green recollections, in particular the memory of a course I took with Marilynne Robinson. At the time, Robinson had not yet won her Pulitzer for the novel *Gilead*, but she was working on it, doing the research that would help her invent the minister at the core of the story. In her course on the Bible as literature, it sometimes seemed to me that her eyes would not meet the eyes of anyone except one favored student from Israel who could read the Old Testament in Hebrew.

As I stand there, straddling my bike, I am struck that when I actually read Robinson’s novel *Gilead*, I could see how her aloof protagonist was straining to bridge the gap between himself and others. No doubt, Robinson, brilliant and introverted, must have been aware of the gap I had sensed in class. No doubt, she was trying—even if awkwardly—to reach across. And if I was not able to receive the full blessing of her instruction, maybe that is because I was too busy wanting to be singled-out for special attention, instead of joining the group and traveling the same shared direction.

I wait a bit longer, there by the darkened Dey House. I could swear that, for a moment, I can sense all the other word-struck lovers who have been lured to this site. I sense the thousands who may have passed with similar yearnings, plus those who took momentary pleasure in simply being near to such literary history. This is not as depressing as I might have expected. I am strangely glad to be a member of such a perceptive, inventive crowd. To be grouped with people who care about meaning—and about conveying it artfully.

In one of her best-known essays, Hampl says: “We carry our wounds and perhaps even worse, our capacity to wound, forward with us. If we learn not only to tell our stories but to listen to what our stories tell us—to write the first draft and then return for the second draft—we are doing the work of memory.”

Perhaps, I realize there on the dark curb, I am doing that work right now.



Ready to finish my ride, I stand on the pedals and pump, enjoying the whip of air as I turn on Market Street and accelerate downhill. I am sated at last, back in my skin. I ride a bit too fast, not worried about what might be coming beyond the weak beam of my headlight. When I turn alongside the Iowa House and brake, and when I lock the bike into the rack, the Midwest mugginess is thick on my arms and face. Still, I stop for one last moment and gaze out over the quiet open lawn, seeing that it is lovely in its own smooth black way, a fenced square that has gone silent for the night.

Fireflies flicker with silver, appearing and disappearing. I am glad to be standing here on a summer evening, feeling my damp shirt turn cool. Tomorrow will be another day, and I am ready for that.



let him speak through you

Messianic Congregation Adat Yeshua

Owings Mills, MD

1994

My father speaks in tongues most akin to crude, ulpan-forged Hebrew with sprinklings of an arrogant American's intermediate French. Hands go up like The Wave around the congregation. Spittle-y ch's (i.e. channukah, challah) percolate around the sanctuary but he's seemingly alone in intermingling nasal *ens* and *zhs*.

I only have a vague idea what Icelandic sounds like—enough to know my mother's tongues could work as hooks backed by The Sugarcubes' jangly pop confections.

The Holy Spirit hovers around the sanctuary, an invisible vacuum wand. Dad's hands go up, Mom's hands go up, she intones, "Kinny keeny kora pity lala sha."

Assemblies of God Summer Camp

Falling Waters, West Virginia

1993

Luke's a counselor-in-training and has his own boxy, private room at the end of our bunkhouse. I'm flooded with excitement and resentment in equal measure when, *voila*, he removes a blanket to unveil his contraband records and turntable.

He whisks The Sugarcubes' *life's too good* out of its sleeve, sets it a-spin; he tenderly lowers his headphones over my ears then, holding eye contact, drops stylus to vinyl in the middle of "Cat," mid-Bjork-sermon, her voice undulating in *Icelandic*, cadence more communicative than any words. Ecstatically, it awakens something both essential and estranging.

Baltimore Metro Area

1983-1985

Under threat of divorce, my father-- an agnostic Jew-- goes to detox. In the critical months that follow, he stays sober-- in large part-- by buying in fully to the 12 steps of AA.

One might assume that steps two (“Came to believe a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity”) and three (“Turned our will and our lives over to the care of god as we understood him”) render some mortifyingly humbled souls susceptible to proselytizing.

Well, my father gets saved in a church parking lot after an AA meeting and spends the next two decades evangelizing to essentially anyone in his path, regardless of potential social, familial (Jesus is not even *just alright* with the rest of our family), or professional consequences.

Though he studies and refers to the AA Big Book nearly as much (and as annoyingly) as the Bible, this passage from *The Family Afterward* is apparently lost on him:

Assume, on the other hand that father has, at the outset, a stirring spiritual experience. Overnight, as it were, he is a different man. He becomes a religious enthusiast. He is unable to focus on anything else. As soon as his sobriety begins to be taken as a matter of course, the family may look at their strange new dad with apprehension, then with irritation. There is talk of spiritual matters morning, noon and night. He may demand that the family find God in a hurry, or exhibit amazing indifference to them and say he is above worldly considerations. (AA World Services, 1939)

My mother, also Jewish, loves my father deeply and is pregnant with my sister. In a manner somehow as carefully considered as it is impulsively insane, she willingly succumbs to a folie à deux.

Assemblies of God Summer Camp

Falling Waters, West Virginia

1993

If you run into my bunkmate Cory you can count on a few things: he’ll somehow remind you he’s from Philly and will dismiss most anything you say as “gay.” I’m not sure if I want him to like me because he’s twice my size or, simply, because he doesn’t like me.

He likes to feign interest after light’s out asking Isaac and I—in his best approximation of *earnestly curious*--how we, as Jewish boys, landed in church camp. If I (Isaac has no desire for Cory’s approval and is, thus, immune) take the bait, I’m invariably reminded of my mistake by the click of his flashlight and projection of his dick onto the ceiling.



The rest of the bunk is ostensibly at lunch. Luke and I take our acoustic guitars into the bathhouse. He explains *Hold On, I’m Coming* was recorded in a Stax Records bathroom and breaks into a stilted rendition of the chorus that’s bouncing off the concrete block walls when muffled sniggering alerts me to a dread-inducing pair of flipflops-- emblazoned with the Philadelphia Eagles logo-- peeking out from under one of the stalls.

Text messages

Present day

Me: I'm in the middle of this psychedelic, absurdist short story by a Japanese author who wrote the piece in German. It reads like a fever dream, expressed in tongues.

Isaac: That's the thing about stuff translated from another language, especially one farther away from English. On a certain level, it's like eating food someone chewed for you.

Me: Twice-chewed, hallucinogenic lingua, in this case

Azusa Street Revival

Los Angeles

1906

A highly diverse assemblage of pilgrims flocks from across the country to join the revival. First-hand accounts suggest monolingual attendees are *moved by the spirit* to speak fluently in the native tongues of others present and, in some cases, miraculously translate it back into English.

The revival remains newsworthy for years-- a rare instance in its time where Blacks, Whites, Hispanics, and Asians all worship together and women figure prominently in leadership. It is essentially the origin story of the Assemblies of God church-- the world's largest Pentecostal denomination.

Assemblies of God Summer Camp

Falling Waters, West Virginia

1993

Cory's up on stage, tears streaming down his face, the preacher palming his head like a basketball.

"Young man, let the lord speak through you." He holds out his mic against Cory's quivering lower lip.

"Sheda coola bassa nova."

Isaac and I look at each other and start convulsing.



The Gospel According to André

May 2007

Let me tell you, Granny was a stickler for truth. She rolled her eyes. Even I knew all the compliments Mama heaped on me were overkill. Honestly, my brilliance was obvious, so Granny lost interest while Mama blabbered on about my latest accomplishment. And the worst part was Mama kept blocking my view of the living room TV.

Whenever they watched their stupid soap operas, I never bothered them. I needed to know if LeBron and the Cavs were going to make a comeback. My friends always talked about the games in homeroom.

Mama grinned like a possum let loose in a picnic basket. She said, “We got your Uncles Malcom, Ray, and Warren all coming to the graduation. We’ll party all weekend.”

Granny said, “Andre ain’t the first person in this family to graduate. Calm down, Mary.” Granny hated any backtalk, but Mama was in control today.

“Andre’s had his struggles, and it’s time we celebrate. I don’t know why you’re being a downer. My only child finishing high school is a big deal.”

That seemed like as good a time as any to announce my breaking news.

“High school is one tough bitch,” I said. Even though Mama disliked cursing, I knew she’d appreciate me supporting her argument.

“And that’s why we’re having a big party, Honey.”

“Thing is,” I started, “high school is a bit harder than expected. Me and the school decided I’ll come back one more year.”

The room went dead silent.

“Besides, I know you don’t want your baby moving out too soon.”

Mama walked towards me. And Granny sure as hell wasn’t going to miss what happened next. She quickly cleaned her glasses.

Mama hovered over me.

“Repeat that.”

“Mama, it’s fine. Turns out I missed a test over here and flunked another class over there, no biggie. I’ll graduate in 2008.”

“Knew it,” Granny said.

“You’ll both see. I’ll graduate next year. Until then, I’m a super senior.”

“What’s wrong with you?” Mama asked.

“Keisha didn’t graduate after four years,” I said, reminding them of my cousin.

“She finished in *three*,” Mama screamed.

Next thing I knew, her hand smacked me upside my damn head. Mama’s tears flowed down heavy as she darted out the room. She even slammed her bedroom door shut, like a freaking teenager.

The back of my head stung bad. Granny had the biggest smile on her face as she re-enacted me getting smacked.

“And pow,” she hollered. “I knew you’d screw up. I just didn’t know how. But I knew,” Granny chuckled.

That crazy bitch was having a great night. And yes, I know I shouldn’t have called her that. But let me tell you about my dear old grandmother. She had four kids, and on account she was so surly, only my mom still talked to her.

Granny asked, “How’d you fool everyone, Andre? Don’t a school send a letter to the parent saying their child is an idiot?”

Nudging her oxygen tank aside, she set her recliner back a notch. She suffered from arthritis, and her little body wouldn’t be moving from that spot anytime soon.

“Yeah, Granny, they do. I burned every letter from school. And when Mama asked for my report cards, I might have said they couldn’t afford the ink to print any.”

Granny laughed. “Boy, how she ever believe that?”

I laughed too. “Honestly, I don’t know. Guess I’m just lucky.”

“*Super Senior* don’t sound lucky to me.”

The wrinkles on her dark skin were a constant reminder that she was too old to debate. Granny believed if Mama and I stopped with our hardheadedness and just listened to her, our lives would be better. She assumed being ancient gave her a crystal ball. It was a couple years ago her finances got tighter, and she came to live with us. Mama said God would bless her if she took Granny in. She was sure of it.

“Fools, the both of you,” Granny said. She held up some cash. “Now go get me some Bengay before it gets too late.”

I took the money and said, “Mama and I are just gullible.”

As I opened the front door, Granny yelled, “No, you’re both damn fools.”

God knows that woman needed the last word.



Thankfully, the bike ride to Tully’s Pharmacy wasn’t long. Some shit in Alabama could be an hour away for no good reason. That’s how it was with my dad’s trailer. He lived 90 minutes north, so we didn’t see each other too much. Oh, and his new wife didn’t have a lick of sense.

Granny said my dad was a bow-legged loser, and that’s how my Mama liked ‘em. Even so, I was a better man than him, even when I acted like a jackass. Those were Granny’s words, not mine.

As I closed in on the store, I remembered being a super senior wasn’t a bad deal. I always made kids laugh in math class, and I’d have another attempt at winning Homecoming King. My future was bright. And Mama claimed I didn’t think about college. Lots of parties happened there. I might not ever be a student, but I’d go to some campuses sooner or later. Even so, nothing was ever good enough for Mama.

Inside Tully’s, my buddy Kev worked the cash register. I waved at him as I picked up the Bengay and went to the liquor section. Being a minor, I wasn’t an expert on drinking yet, but I already had a soft spot for Samuel Adams. I grabbed a beer, some Oreos, and went to the front.

“What up, Kev?”

He burst into a goofy grin. Homeboy had a massive gut. Poor guy got teased for looking like a whale, but I put a stop to that. I was the man at school, so when I saw a good guy like Kev get bullied for being a fatty, I stuck up for him. It was freshman year I ended his torment, and he still saw me as his hero.

“What up, Andre? I saw Charlie wearing the new Jordans.”

“Good for him, but he should have gotten those bad boys in black.”

He nodded in agreement and scanned the cookies, and then picked up the beer.

“You’re not driving, are you?”

I held my hands up. “Kev, you know I wouldn’t drink and drive. I’m riding my bike home. I just need some liquid courage.”

“And what year were you born, again?”

“1725.”

Kev scanned the beer. “What are you doing this fall?”

I paid him. “Bro, the school begged me to come back. Gotta’ give the people what they want. I’ll be a super senior in September. And graduating in 2008 is better.”

A wave of shock, and then humor, washed over his face. That fatso looked me up and down, trying not to laugh.

“It’s all good,” I said. “I’ll take biology again and I’ll show up to class this time. And I might play basketball. Who knows, maybe I’ll earn a scholarship.”

There was a brief pause before Kev laughed uncontrollably.

“Yo man, didn’t you quit the basketball team a few years ago?” he asked. “Damn, I’m so happy I’m graduating next week. I’d be embarrassed if I was you.”

“I’ll win Homecoming King. You know I came in second last fall.”

Kev thought about this, shrugged his shoulders, and then laughed his ass off.

“Seriously, can I get my fucking change?” I asked.

He handed me the cash.

“Oh yeah,” I said, “I heard they don’t make the gown large enough for the obese. Is that true?”

Kev said, “Mine fits great. You know what it’s like wearing those gowns. Whoops, you don’t.” He got another fit of the giggles.

Exiting the store, I opened my beer and savored every drop, delaying my trip back home. After I finished the beer, I dropped the empty can on the ground.

A couple months later, before he enrolled in Grambling State University, Kev got fired from the pharmacy. Someone had reported liquor being sold to minors.

During the bike ride home, I still couldn’t believe Kev had mocked me. I was always funny, but never stupid. Nobody danced better than me. I could recite entire scenes from *The Office*. Everyone wanted to be my friend. Last Halloween I dressed as a giant bottle of whiskey, even smelled like it. People called me hilarious. Hell, I even taught Kev and another buddy how to take a girl’s bra off one-handed.

Biking around town always cleared my mind. I didn’t know what to do about Mama. She really freaked out about my future. There weren’t many jobs here. And she still didn’t trust the south to be a place for a black man to succeed. But I was clueless on where to head.

Restlessness took over when I tried to plan life after high school. Maybe I would go into the military. *Call of Duty* was always fun to play. But I knew getting up before sunrise sucked balls. There were cars. I loved cars, but Granny said that was just because I didn’t have one.

Nighttime was near. I busted my butt to get home before Mama worried.



I strolled into the living room with cash in my pocket and some Bengay.

Granny asked, “Where’s my change?”

“Sorry Granny, there ain’t no change.”

“I gave you \$20.”

“Prices going up on account of Bush.”

Her hatred of George W. Bush took over, and the cash stayed in my pocket.

Mama, eyes fixed on me, entered from the hallway and crossed her arms. This gesture scared me into sitting. I damn near bolted. Only problem was I had nowhere to go.

Mama asked, “Andre, why’d you lie?”

She seemed both tired from crying and ready to pounce, but then she sniffled. I hadn’t seen her this upset since last Valentine’s Day. That was when Granny told her God shouldn’t send a man to a woman who only knows how to lose ‘em. Mama had herself a good cry that day.

I said, “You deserve to be proud of me. And I did make you proud for a little while. I was always going to tell you.”

Granny said, “Mary, the boy was going to say his diploma fell off the mail truck.”

The old woman had jokes.

All the anger in Mama’s body reached a boiling point as she gritted her teeth.

“Mama,” I said, “I know I was wrong to lie. I’m sorry.”

“Let me tell you something,” she said, “you’re about to be 18, and your lazy ass is getting a job.”

“Mama—”

“I’m talking, boy,” she screamed. “If you want to continue living under my roof, you’re going to get a job and go to school. If you’re not about to graduate this time next year, I wish you good luck. You think life is a joke. It’s not. Stop being a goddamn loser.”

Even Granny was startled. Usually, I’d be funny to make Mama calm down, but my arsenal of jokes was empty.

The brown carpet on the floor creaked as Mama came near and bent down, meeting my eyes. Her forehead remained lineless, but the grey hairs on her temples were spreading. And there were crow’s feet near her eyes that matched Granny’s. I wondered when she aged.

“Andre, what am I supposed to do? Maybe I should have sent you to Paul’s.”

Only during the worst of times did Mama ever think my dad might be a better parent. Since chaos was his normal, we all knew I was lucky to have her.

She asked, "What's your dream? What is it you want to do?"

There was one dream I had since turning 13. It was something I wanted to pursue, but Mama had already cried enough. I read some celebrities got paid by promoters to attend certain nightclubs. All I needed to do was become famous first. Even so, I kept this dream to myself.

"I wish I knew," I told her. "But I'll graduate next year. I promise."

"I always knew something was wrong. Maybe I did too many late shifts at work. I just needed to believe you were fine."

Mama returned to her room without saying goodnight.

Granny rubbed Bengay cream onto her elbow. Even though she hardly walked, she remained in discomfort. It was tough to recall her exact age because she always gave a different answer. This wasn't her memory fading, she just liked to be a smart ass. Sometimes she talked about the Great Depression, and sometimes about her brother's death in Vietnam. Last Thanksgiving, she got tipsy and told us how she met James Brown after a concert, and that night became his "favorite fan." Mama didn't seem to care for that story.

Granny usually grunted to even reach her knees. I took the cream from her and rubbed it into her wrinkly kneecaps. For a while, her whole body relaxed.

"Andre," she said, "you did me a favor. I didn't want to see your Uncle Ray, Malcom, or Warren anyway."

"You like Uncle Warren?"

"My youngest son is a cheat who didn't pay me after the Super Bowl. He lost that bet fair and square. Your mama is my favorite child now."

Looking at how Granny treated her, I didn't see any good that did Mama.

She said, "You're going to call your uncles and tell them not to come. Mary already got plenty on her plate. And when you get your first paycheck from whatever dumb job you get, give Mary \$60. That's what she spent on your graduation present."

I nodded and started working on the other leg.

"Listen, I already put pressure on Mary, and you're doing the same. Good people can break from the weight of burdens. If you get your lazy ass in gear, I'll watch my big mouth. Deal?"

"Sounds good, Granny."

She muted the television and asked, "You want some advice?"

There was no point in responding, she was going to tell me anyway.

She said, “You’re a good bullshitter. You can go far in life. A lot further than your mama’s gone. And plenty further than me. Every president is a bullshitter. Just point it somewhere, okay?”

“Point it where?”

“In life, we all got a sweet spot. Find yours. A hustler like you will be rich one day, long as you don’t go to prison.”

I really did try to remember that moment. Maybe I wasn’t the smartest kid, but I knew Granny didn’t have much longer left.

“Sounds about right,” I said.

“And one last thing,” she said before closing her eyes, “you’re an alright kid, but you’re such a pain in the ass. Maybe you get that from me, not that it matters. Just stop with the clown act. Okay, I’m done. Go to bed.”



Present Day

Mama tells me 33 ain’t old, but I feel old right now. Funny thing is, Granny just kept living. She lived to see me graduate high school, and she saw me sell perfume for a retailer that fired my ass for flirting with the customers. She kept her promise of being nicer to Mama...for a year. They continued butting heads, but her heart wouldn’t stop beating, until it finally did.

Granny said a few nice things to me when I got an Associate Degree. And I think she liked my ex-fiancée, Vanessa. Not too long ago, she even seemed disappointed our wedding was called off. Vanessa accused me of being a closeted asshole. I’d be lying if I told you I knew what went wrong.

Eventually, I did find that sweet spot, and now I sell used cars, and I’m saving for my own dealership. Granny had joked she’d be my first customer, but she didn’t trust me to sell her anything good. Let me tell you, her joke was hogwash, more than half the cars I sell are “respectable.” Towards the end, even Granny preached I was mighty good at my job.

Sometimes on the weekends I drove her to the Gulf Coast, and this made her happy. The clear-green water was calming. Talking smack to one another was our specialty, but in those moments, she’d recline back and enjoy the sounds of crashing waves. And afterwards, we’d always have some tender ribs and hush puppies from Lil Smokey’s Barbecue. For dessert, she couldn’t get enough of their peach cobbler. That was her last complete meal.

Anyway, I’m sitting in my office now, three days after Granny’s funeral. Mama’s boyfriend said he saw Granny writing before she passed. She left letters for Mama and me. Mama is keeping quiet on what her letter says. I finally open mine. It reads as follows:

Dear Andre,

Make your own dealership happen. You're a natural leader. I still can't believe so many go to you of all people for a car, but you're a charmer. Keep looking out for your mama. Help her go on that fancy vacation she's been yakking on about for years. I know you will. You're a good son.

And let me tell you, you screwed up with Vanessa. Only marry someone that is too good for you, and she was WAY too good for you. The mess up happened when she asked about you two ever having kids during my birthday dinner, and you told her, "I got my mind on my money, and my money on my mind." What type of word salad is that?! And remember when Vanessa wanted a second slice of cake, and you told her be careful, she might not ever get a bikini body. But according to you, you're such an all-knowing expert on talking to women. I Disagree!

~Granny

And just like that, Granny gets the last word.



Last Year of Peseta

The pocket money - which I like to think of as generous - gets confiscated by Grandma at the airport. She rolls the bank notes into each other like a herring. "I'll keep it safe for you," she says, and slips the peseta-herring in the pocket of her fake snakeskin bag.

It was the last year of peseta. In our local bank my parents and I queue for our final chance to get the stash of heavy notes, decorated with images of the Americas. I overhear Mum saying to Dad that the exchange rate was a theft. He says that the distraction of the trip would be worth it.

The week after, Grandma and I embark on the exhausting plane trip - the first for both of us - followed by a mountainous bus ride. "We will first use your peseta before I exchange my currency," Grandma says, when she dissects the pocket-fish and pays for the bus fares and bottled-water. The ride makes me nauseous but the mustache of the bus driver dares me to suck it up.

Our discounted hotel with a small pool is next to a five-star hotel with an infinity pool. Upon arrival, Grandma hides the bundle under her beach clothes in the bedroom dresser of our tiny hotel room (we don't have a sea view). When a cleaning person comes around in the morning, Grandma points them towards the edges of the room, to *clean properly*. All the while, she keeps her eye fixed on the dresser.

"Like flies on dung," grandma whispers. She frowns at the staff, that cruises around our breakfast table and spits more insults between her teeth. Then she gesticulates wildly and repeats words in Czech and German, unwilling to acknowledge Spanish as the means of communication in the dining hall.

I monitor the movement of the flies when we stuff our pockets with bread and fruits for lunch, having only paid for a half-board in the hotel. No matter how loudly grandma rolls out the word *heiss*, the servers press their bodies to our chairs and don't move away. When a server finally brings Grandma her hot water, we're already on our way to the beach.

I can feel the missing money burning my pocket, as we walk by the beach vendors selling bracelets out of shells, keychains and excursions, *Snorkeling 1+1, discubra delfines y ballenas, moonlight swimming*, I'm sure Mum gave me the peseta to do all of them.

As the days pass, Grandma's trip to the exchange office seems to be further behind than the sun we watch disappearing behind the horizon on the beach. On Gran Canaria, the days stretch endlessly like this beach strip under our hotel but then the sun leaves too early.

A dozen of hours later, grandma is snoring when I take her wallet and hide in the bathroom. I'm counting up the floral-shaped peseta coins for a street portrait, or an ice-cream. From behind the door, I hear how she opens the dresser and screams, which prompts the cleaner to return to our room.

The cleaner and grandma both look shaken when they see me lying on the floor, spreading my limbs over the coins. The cleaner offers me a piece of candy but I refuse to take it, a cheap consolation prize. Grandma arranges the peseta back in her handbag. She promises we will go to the infinity pool by the end of the trip. I only need to give up on the ice-cream now.



On our last day, we see the woman from afar.

"She looks like me," Grandma points at her. Indeed, the woman has the same one-piece swimsuit, the same type of flabby arms, shiny dark hair without any silver strings. She swims badly the same way Grandma swims badly. Another person would recoil from this type of doppelganger, but Grandma looks flattered.

In the future, we'll run into exes and neighbors at far-flung beaches, but at this point we're new to traveling, due to age in my case and historical circumstances in Grandma's case. We don't consider meeting her a coincidence. We consider meeting her a miracle.

It's strange, but within a few minutes she's no longer a stranger. As it turns out, grandma's double grew up just twenty kilometers away from where Grandma had. Despite that, her life was nothing, nothing like Grandma's. In 1968, the grandma double emigrated to Western Germany and became a stewardess. When she retired, she married a local realtor in Gran Canaria. I imagine she's my grandma instead when we share our stolen lunch with her. She explains to us that the bread rolls are called *cruasanes*. We nod and like them and her even better.

When my grandma's double and I go for a swim, I confide in her about how Grandma keeps the bank. She asks what do I need, if I have the sun and the waves. She adds that she had spent everything she had so she could come to this island. Her unkind tone surprises me. I say I thought she was a successful flight attendant, but she vanishes into the waves.

When the waves grow, grandma calls me back. Then the tide hits the shore and gets inside of the snakeskin handbag. The ocean threatens to eat up our last pesetas, sun blocker and half an apple. We fight back for our possessions. I wrap the banknotes carefully in napkins so they dry till the sun decides it's time for dinner.

In the dining hall, the server witness Grandma sliding peaches into her purse. They gather around and ask us to empty the insides of our bag. We take out the stolen fruit and bread in napkins, piece by piece.

Back in our room, it dawns upon us that our napkins contained the rest of our peseta. We rush downstairs. The dining room looks untouched through the closed round windows, ready to receive new vacationers for breakfast.

I ask the receptionist to use the phone in the lobby phone area. I'm waiting to be connected, when she breaths behind my back and murmurs: "Verunka, is it necessary?"

She takes the phone receiver and speaks in words I've heard only on the news before, *loan-to-value, assessment, sequestration*. I press my body over hers. "You'll need to tell her about the bankruptcy yourself," I hear her say. Mum wishes me good night and hangs up.

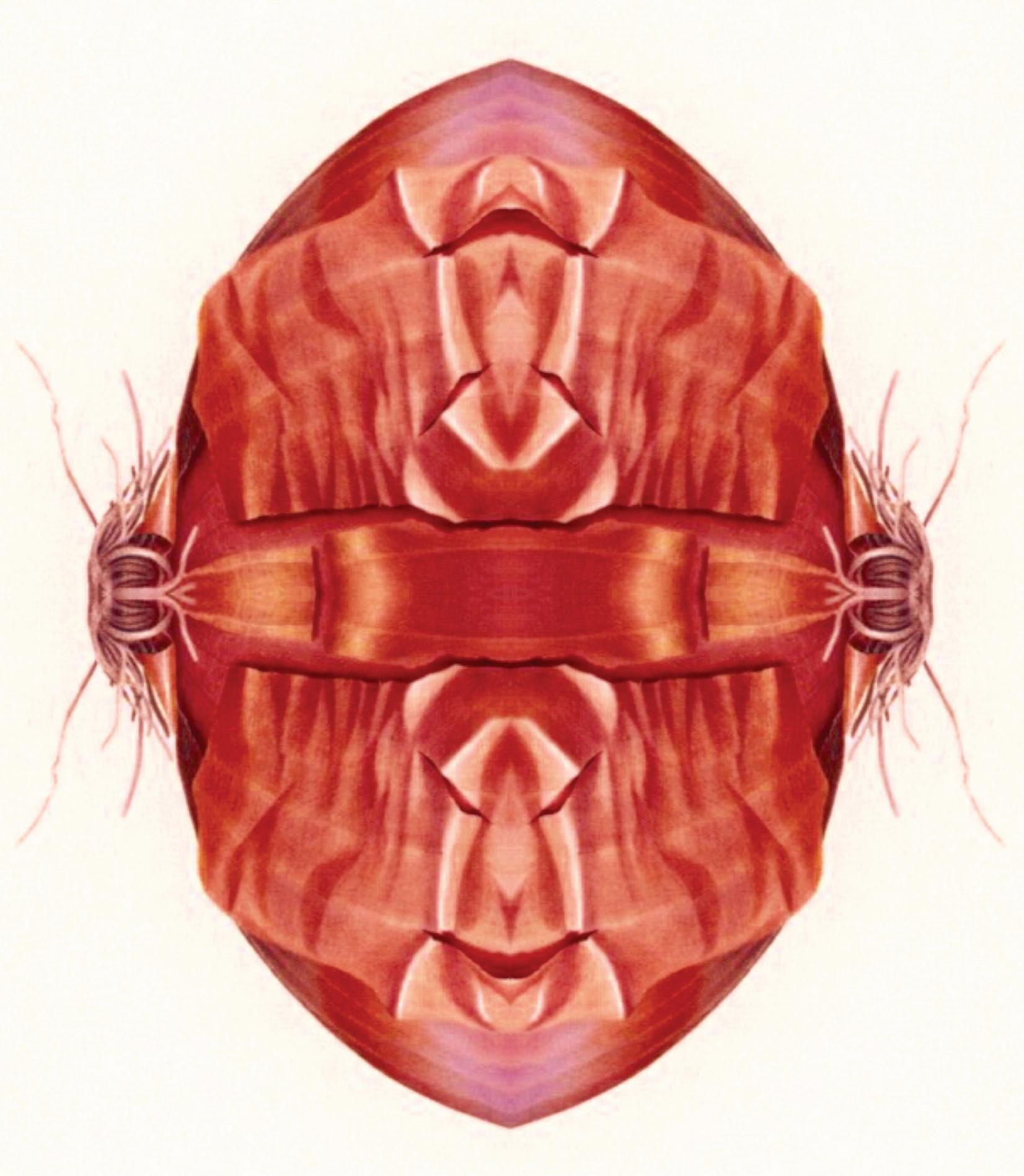
"It might be better if you came to live with me. For a while. Till your parents sort it out," grandma says. I flee upstairs and bury my head under the blanket. Grandma pets my head. In the night, my sleep mixes with the cicadas and piña colada-flavored laughter from a party at the endless pool. Grandma stares out of the window and her endless cigarette intrudes with the clean room scent long in the night.

Late in the night, when the cocktails and laughter from the opposite terrace dry up, Grandma wakes me up, holding our beach towels. We breathe in the cold air and fiddling of cicadas as we descend the outdoor staircase, leaving giraffe-like shadows.

I've never seen Grandma doing any sports, but now, she swings her body over the half-finished fence and catches me in her arms when I follow her over. She rests at the chaise longue when I leap inside. The water is crisp and the swim in the infinity pool is worth every lost peseta. The grandma double would say that money means something to those without fantasy, without lives to escape from, without a persona.

For our last morning on the island, I suggest we sneak into the breakfast room of The Marriott. I put the *cruasanes* in my pouch and we eat them on the bus, headed to the airport for our flight back home. They last us till we reach Grandma's house.





The Kiss That Arrived with The Wind by Bill Wolak

To the Brink of Central America

Veracruz to Tapachula, Mexico

30-31 January 1998

The day train from Mexico City pulled up on the other side of this platform at 8:30 p.m., in plenty of time for this train, *El Centroamericano*, to be caught. Of course.

(The other day I had taken that very same train – and arrived just in time to miss this one.)

One platform down, the night run bound for that City awaits its passengers.

Both trains are brightly lit.

And now this is it for me, on board *El Centroamericano*, bound for Tapachula. This is the most infamous of the Mexican hell trains (according to the guidebooks). A pure second-class ride, it is said to be, with cars in poor repair, running eternally late – and lots of theft.

Well, this is a pure second-class train. When I bought my ticket, there was no option for any other class.

This train? We are just two unlit passenger cars, a freight box, one locomotive. Old second-class cars these are, too. The linoleum is torn up – vinyl upholstery peeling off seats – many cracked windows. The vestibule doors are tied open.

And how much trust should one have? The conductor has his bag chained to an overhead rack.

But there's plenty of room for me to put my ol' canvas knapsack, *Rocinante*, at my feet. I settle into my window-side seat, putting my feet atop her. My *morral* (woven shoulder bag) is tucked aside me. Within it is everything I need to have on hand: water, a bit of food, a flashlight, bandana, toilet paper ... and of course, this journal and pen.

Well, just say a quick one to Saint Christopher, the patron saint of travelers. And have faith, have faith

Oh, but when I think about when I first considered taking this train in November '88. In those days, it left from Mexico City, not here, Veracruz. No-one knew when tickets would go on sale. Waiting and waiting in the growing madness downstairs in the second-class area of

Mexico City's Buenavista Station. Watching the boxes and bundles mound. The roosters crowing and goats bleating.

I lost my nerve after several hours.

I went upstairs to the first class ticket window and got a passage for Oaxaca.

Last winter, I rode the other hell train here in Mexico – to Mérida. It wasn't that bad of an adventure. But that 24-hour ride lasted, oh, some 46 hours and so – and really, we all should have been in three cars instead of crammed into one sole *vagón*. We were so tightly packed, the armed soldiers couldn't even do their requisite searches at each station. Ah, but that all is another travel tale.

So here I am, steeled for this adventure.

Vendors are swarming on board. The smell of their food fills the air. Babies cry in the blackness. The last boxes and bundles are tied down. A few passengers are already asleep, not disturbed by the warning horn.

As we pull away, the platform lights checkerboard across my journal. Soon they disappear. I continue to write by flashlight.

We click and rock through the railyards, starting this southbound journey. One that begins – and is supposed to end – at night.

A journey that will carry me near the Guatemala border, the brink of Central America.



Once the danger of thrown rocks has passed, I open my curtain-less window to the night and its smells. The heaviness of rain. The stale hops of beer. An overwhelming perfume of a night flower or a woman aboard this train. Then, that scent of rain that once was or is yet to be.

A near-new moon dangles in the cloud-shadowed sky. Was it last night it was just the barest of a sliver? I don't know if it's waning or waxing. The days and months flow and weave into a blur of past, present, future

That sweet perfume swells again. The smell of burning brush leaves a bitter taste on the tongue.

Past a cemetery, ghostly white in the dark.

At Paso del Toro, we stop for a few more passengers. I watch a man sitting in his house, in a fine-carved chair. He sips a drink through a straw. The colors of his TV set play across his face, across the photos hung crooked on a papered wall.

And once again, we quickly rattle through countryside silhouetted against the night.

Almost 11:30 p.m. – I am awakened by the jerk of this train, the hiss of brakes, by the bright station lights of Tierra Blanca falling in my face, and the hurried hushed voices.

And by the women who are swarming aboard. ¿Quiere café con leche? ¿Quiere gorditas a un peso? ¿Quiere atole de arroz? Gorditas – ¿quiere gorditas? Nescafé caliente, el Nescafé. ¿Cuántos?

More passengers come aboard, carrying rope-bound boxes upon shoulders, shoving heavy sacks down the aisle with their feet. The search for an unoccupied seat becomes more difficult.

The one beside me is taken. Soon, that man's steady breathing, gentle snore drifts on this night.

I catnap. At 12:15 a.m., the cars jump back as the locomotive is reattached. At 12:20, I hear the horn blow and the muted rails of our departure.

All night we speed through the darkness. We stop once or twice for a freight train. Its passage rocks these cars. The stops at towns.



Daybreak, Jesús Carranza – Fog hangs thick, wet. The moisture beads upon the heavy growth that edges a placid river.

The Isthmus of Tehuantepec is swirled in early morning mists. The yellow lights of distantly scattered houses pierce the haze.

A man on horseback herds dozens of cattle down a dirt road. His dog runs, legs lifting off the red soil, rounding up the strays.

What few villages there are we don't stop at. Instead, we continue on at a fast clip through the clearer countryside under blue skies. The mountains to the north are still cloaked. We follow a river that occasionally tumbles into rapids and waterfalls. Sometime after a heavy rain, it had broadened to leave still, deep pools behind.

The vestibules are full of boxes of bananas, sacks of oranges.

Matías Romero, Oaxaca – Breakfast comes with the women, dark hair pulled back, clean dresses worn and torn. *Champurrado, atole, chilis rellenos, pollo.*

A man enters with two wooden cages. From each of three compartments stick out the bright phosphorescent green of rooster tails, the short, rounded tails of hens.

We wait here for a long time, no engine hooked up. Yet, at either end, disconnected ones hum.

Birds peck along the stone bed. A boat-tailed grackle, feathers blue-black in the sun. The pigeons, neck feathers magenta-green.

The women's sing-song sales cease to fill the carriages.

At 9:15 we finally leave. Now one large, two smaller engines pull us forward.

The distant mountains are clear.

Late morning, Ixtepec – The line splits for Tapachula, and for Salinas Cruz where no trains go any longer.

I slept until here, leaning my head against the window. The warm wind blew through the cracks of the pane and the loose strands of my hair.

The air and landscape are a bit dryer here. The sun bright, but not quite bleaching the sky as it does in Central America.

Juchitán – Women board with crockery urns, handles tied together. Their long skirts almost sweep the ground. Embroidered *huipiles* hug their large breasts. They cradle long sheaths of flowers in their arms. The blossoms are towel-wrapped to protect them from the heat and dust.

Doña Teresa asks me if the now-empty seat next to me is taken. She rests her flowers upright between her legs.

(I feel as if I am in a Diego Rivera painting ...)

~ ~ ~ *Musical Interlude* ~ ~ ~

Two pieces of thin wood shims, held together at one end, slapped together in the quick rhythm of a fast-travelling train.

A metal rod as a counterpoint.

Continue this rhythm until Chahuities, Oaxaca ...

We enter between low *cerros* seared brown in this dry season. The brush is charred by wildfires.

The thick scent of doña Teresa's *azucena* fills the noon. Her high-boned cheek rests on an up-turned hand. Bright pink ribbons braid into her almost-pure-white hair.

Along a dry riverbed, cows seek the shade of small-leafed trees.

One of the roosters within here crows – and another further back in our car.

The mountains have disappeared from the west.

Past mango orchards bronze-tipped with the coming of fruit. Their flowers have fallen away.

Chahuities, Oaxaca – Doña Teresa leaves, embracing her bouquet.

Those mountains to the west rise and retreat again. Then flatlands stretch out to the unseen sea. The Eastern Sierra rises higher, stronger.

About 3 p.m., we enter Tonalá. The sun is fierce, almost blue-white. We are here nigh-on an hour. The engines are refueled.

Is it my imagination, or do I smell the sea?

This ride isn't all that hellish. Except for the bathrooms. But, honestly, after having to go in mere holes in the ground, you can really appreciate the luxury of these. No worse than an old outhouse.

Our sister train, north-bound, arrives. A few minutes later – five to four – we continue south.

I have a moment's view of a *laguna* and the aroma of salt air.

Ejido La Polca – The train suddenly slows as we are leaving here. Piglets scatter from the tracks. I hear their squealy grunts.

A broad expanse of water appears again, dotted with heavily treed islands. Laguna La Joya. High hills rise along its southern shore. Cattle graze on the pasture plain.

For a while, we ride along its edge. The late-afternoon sun shines blindingly off its smooth surface. A great blue heron stands stoically in the shallows. Ducks swim away from our clatter.

I swipe my forehead. My fingers blacken.

Morrón – A village at the sea's edge. Music plays from the store at the station. Under the shade of the porch roof, men sit, sharing liters of beer. Canoes and launches lie beached upon the shore.

It's just a lazy Saturday afternoon. It has been all along the way. Classrooms are abandoned. Children stop their play to wave at us.

A woman scrubs clothes on a washboard. Women hug babies on hips. A woman watches out the door of her store.

A basketball game here. In another village, families sit under the shade of trees, watching a soccer game. Their eyes turn from the blue and white uniforms to us as we rattle by. Or a volleyball game on a sandy street.

To the east, the Chiapan highlands touch the clouds.



The shadows begin to lengthen and the sun to golden. The sky, the Sierra, the clouds become tinged with pale lavender. The air cools. The sky-horizon turns to orange-rose, to magenta. A bare-limbed tree fills with white egrets.

Two men pedal hard, pedal fast down a country lane.

We clatter over a bridge spanning a silty river. Brown-skinned boys splash in the water.

Within this car, a mother holds her daughter. They watch the mountains tower, rake the sky. A husband cradles his wife's head in his lap. They talk in hushed voices.

A thickened crescent moon boats across the greying sky. The perfume of flowers swells in the dusk. The smell of brushfires slashes the *anohecer*. Electric lights from homes gleam bright yellow. The landscape falls into black. The sunset colors fade as the heavy blue twilight settles.

Again ... and again the scent of flowers.

The train inside is once more blackened, except for the play of passing village lights. Our engine's lamp cuts a path through the new night. The conductor's flashlight dances across the ceiling, across the walls, as he collects the fares of new passengers.

A thousand stars stud the sky.

I awaken at a town stop. The conductor gets up from his seat, from the embrace of his sweetheart. *Sigue, sigue a Tapachula*, he shouts. He impatiently paces the aisle, flashlight beam bouncing on the ceiling, the floor, the tired faces.

I look at my watch. Five after ten. A bit over an hour behind schedule.

We pull away, past glimmering rivers and ponds. I gaze at the stars, now several tens of thousands.

Out on the horizon is the brightness of our destination.



Old Young Mother by Samantha Steiner

What Stays With You

My classmates in Ecuador called the psicólogas—even those who may not have been psychologists but taught us psychology anyway—*psicólocas*, as in *psycho-crazies*, a play on words that showed how little respect they commandeered among teenagers. This is probably why Enrique took on the task of the day as a gag: *draw a self-portrait in the form of a tree*. He drew a tree that could fit within the constraints of a quarter—flicks for branches—in the far corner of an A4 blank page. As I laughed and rolled my eyes, I drew mine, using the v method for the branches I'd learned years before in an art class. The tree took up the entire sheet with a brawny trunk, and like always, I left a hole in the middle—a hollow shelter where snow and rain could only barge in with fervent gales—a place where a squirrel could rest.

She was pale, and her skin appeared even more ghostlike on days she wore dark lipstick. I remember her face the most, perpetually scrunched up like there was a stale odor in the air wherever she went. She walked around, her words escaping me until she reached Enrique.

“Tú estás loco,” she said. You. Are. Crazy. She halted after every word.

He laughed, treasuring his joke, uttering that a tree was just that, a tree.

I showed her mine.

“Tú estás loca también.”

“What. Why?”

“That gaping hole. Something’s missing. From you or your life.”

“But that’s for a squirrel. You know, a home,” I said. I wanted to explain I wasn’t crazy. That it meant I’d make space for others. That she’s the reason we used the word *psicóloca*.

“Still,” she said—then walked away.

She wasn’t a therapist or psychologist or someone who could diagnose me, but in a way, she represented someone that could. And so I thought about this moment whenever someone spoke about seeing psicólogos. What if I went, sat in an office, and they told me that I indeed was loca? If a tree with a hole told *her* all that, what would happen if I used my words? Said more? Would I hurt myself as if I were trying to pry the outer bark of a trunk with the force of my fingernails? For years, I avoided psychologists and psychology courses, vowing never to speak with one nor show them who I was through a drawing or conversation or anything. I was convinced there was more harm in it than good.

The eventual impulse to search for a therapist would come more than a decade later while living in the United States—during a bout of desperation intertwined within a series of many firsts—enclosed

in my house during the last cold of April. The need came when others told me how much it had helped them. When I felt like I had no other option if I didn't want to remain listless in bed. During the first online session I listed my traumas as if they were the ingredients for a recipe.

I told her about the recent cancer diagnosis in my family. We shared moments from the first pandemic of our lives. I revealed how it was the first time I woke, day in and day out, before the sun bore its light. How it was the first time I couldn't quell the anxiousness. But I didn't mention the aversion to therapists while we switched between English and Spanish during our video chats. I didn't share how the tree-drawing task came back to me just a short while after I started speaking to her—when I saw a blue jay commit a kidnapping—as if the universe wanted to show me that time can suppress an unpleasant memory but the mind is always ready to evoke it.

My brother and I were in my backyard when the plunderer swooped down by the red maple. It happened so fast that at first I couldn't process the uproar. Midair, the sparrow struck the blue jay with its beak until it opened its claws, and then I saw something thud on the grass like a ball of hail—a nestling that lied shivering some feet from the tree, coming onto itself like a cocoon. My brother hurried to shield it within a palm, and I looked up, waiting to see leaves and twigs, a careful nest huddled on top of a branch. But I saw nothing. Then he pointed to the trunk, and slowly my eyes noticed a gaping hole within the thick bark of the tree.

I lifted a ladder, and my brother climbed as the mother sparrow flew around us in circles. We were wingless foes to her. My brother released his grip on the shivering fledgling at the base of the hole's opening, trusting that it would notice it wasn't being taken and its siblings were just inches away. But it stayed in place, waiting for the whiplash, the constrict of claws, for its eyes to be eaten by a cannibal bird. He nudged it. An external force. A shove. A reminder that the predator was gone. Then again until it crept back to where it was taken from. I hoped it would find solace within the warm bark. That with time it could shake it off. Even though the fright would become a souvenir, like coming upon a flawless feather on a path, saving it in a jacket pocket—then months, years later—letting your fingers reach down and feel the forgotten quill, all the while speaking to a once stranger you pay to conjure the memory of a moment, a thing, a person, some words that'll always live within the deep of your bones.

Clarissa Cervantes





Love, Anything but Ordinary (left, top)
Summer Sunset (left, bottom)
Californians (above)
by Clarissa Cervantes

Silent Passions

We used to meet in the library near the rare books collection. She insisted we meet there so we couldn't talk. She believed that the spoken word was too clumsy and imprecise to express the depth of feeling that we shared for one another. She explained this in a message that she passed to me on a yellow, sticky note. The spoken word, she argued, was too base and animalistic to capture the complexity of our relationship. We might as well be dogs at a cafe, barking at one another across a table, diminishing the weight of our passion with our awkward, fumbling, aimless banter.

Instead, she preferred the precision of only communicating through the written word. Sitting across from me in the library, her long brown hair framing an intense face with piercing, grey-blue eyes that seemed to bore right into my soul, she would pass me notes expressing her thoughts, feelings, and dreams in the most complex and poetic language I had ever read. Her words were like a labyrinth of symbols, allusions, and references – creating such a confounding literary maze that even TS Elliot would have gotten lost within its twisting and misleading passages.

It would take me hours upon hours to decode her love letters. I would search through the aisles of the library like a literary cryptologist, hunting for tomes so rare and dusty that the librarians had long since forgotten they existed. Eventually after consulting Shakespeare, Chaucer, Homer, Poe, the Tibetan Book of the Dead, a 1958 Chicago phone book, a collection of racist propaganda by Dr. Seuss, Brooke Shield's semi-autobiography, some ancient Sumerian erotic poetry, a book detailing the history of Canadian bacon, and a collection of free verse written by a long dead professor of Horticulture – her love note would suddenly blossom into a bouquet of annotations. The fragrance of all the references would make me dizzy – as if I had decoded the most mysterious and complex of puzzles – so complex in fact that I soon realized that each puzzle I solved would only lead to another puzzle, and then another, and another. I spent days studying her letters as my hair grew long and mangy and my general hygiene sank to increasingly profound depths of deplorableness.

I'm sure she did not find my notes as complex as the ones she composed. While she enjoyed weaving together beautiful tapestries of words which reverberated through history with their etymological connotations, my letters were far more minimalistic like a Raymond Carver or Ernest Hemingway short story. "Want to grab a beer?" "Damn, I'm hungry." "Can you watch my book bag while I go to the bathroom?" "Gross, there's a woman letting her dog drink out of the water fountain." However, she seemed to enjoy my simple messages. She wrote me a note saying I was like her personal Mellors, a reference I knew from D.H. Lawrence's novel *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. She flashed me a playful smile as I read her note. Then she tucked my letter away into her journal. I felt special. She liked what I wrote enough to save it.

When we finally made love, she insisted that we abide by the same rules. We could not make a sound. Not one. She wrote me a simple message on a pink post-it note. We are better than the animals in the zoo. No grunting and mewling like pigs fornicating in the mud. No talking. No moaning. Gasping. Nothing. She didn't even want to hear the sound of my breath.

Still, she found a way to express herself. As I looked down at her face, the moonlight slipping into her bedroom through a crack in the curtains, I could see her eyes close, revealing some kind of strange symbols written on her eyelids with mascara. In the heat of the moment, I couldn't exactly make the symbols out. They would flutter by so quickly as her eyes opened and closed in the moonlight. Plus, my mind was too feverish with stress, - trying not to make a sound during our lovemaking -focusing on breathing as silently as possible while in the throes of carnal passion - that it became impossible to concentrate on the message she had written other than that it consisted of two symbols, one drawn on each eyelid. I tried my hardest to commit them to memory, but as soon as we came to a crescendo - everything I was trying to hold inside my mind was swept away by an overwhelming wave of joy that left my entire body tingling and in near paralysis.

As we laid in bed together afterward, I tried to get a better look at the symbols on her eyelids. I rolled over and watched her in the moonlight, her chest slowly rising and falling - silently - always silently - and I looked closely at her eyes. They were shut. Unfortunately, the symbols were no more than mere smudges now, erased by our silent passion. I wanted to ask her what they were, what they meant, but as soon as I opened my mouth, she rolled over, pressed a finger against my lips, shook her head, and kissed me. It was long and deep. Then she moved her lips close to my ear and breathed softly and rhythmically until I fell asleep.

Shortly after we made love, she sent me a letter. I was so excited to receive it in the mail. Nobody sends mail any more except bill collectors. However, the language of the letter was so complex, it took me nearly two weeks of research to realize that she was breaking up with me. By the time I uncovered the last clue - a reference to an obscure romantic poem written in Gaelic - she had already run off and married her comparative world literature professor - a man possessing a seemingly endless supply of obscure literary trivia - and who also happened to be a trained mime.

How could I compete?

Sitting at home, surrounded by notebooks of research stacked all around my couch, I poured myself a glass of wine, lit a cigarette, and tossed my match into the piles of now worthless reams of paper surrounding me - and watched as the flames crackled through them and eventually danced up the walls, setting off the smoke alarm, alerting the local fire department, who promptly arrived and sprayed down everything in my apartment - my notebooks, my textbooks, and me - with a powerful hose. The force of the water knocked me off the couch and into my bookshelf, causing an avalanche of old - and now dripping wet - hardbacks and paperbacks to come crashing down on my head, knocking me unconscious, where I dreamed about a silence so powerful that it made the written word my former lover so cherished dissolve into nothingness.

Checkmate

Tuesday

Dani didn't have to check the caller ID when her phone woke her from a dead sleep.

"Dani, one of the encyclopedias is missing." She didn't respond. "Dani?"

They had this conversation at least once a week, but 3:00 a.m. was a new record. Usually, the calls ended by eleven or midnight. Dani imagined her father pacing around the library in his plaid bathrobe, searching for the missing volume. Where was Julia, his overnight nurse?

"I can't do anything about it right now, Dad. But I'll call you first thing in the morning, okay?"
Silence.

"Okay." Click.

Eleven seconds later, her phone rang again.

"Yes, Dad?"

"I love you."

"Love you too."

Dani knew that he'd have no recollection of the call. She phoned him from her office cubicle the following day to remind him of their dinner date on Friday.

"So, I'll see you Friday?"

"Friday." Click.

Thirty-two seconds later, her phone rang.

"Yes?"

"Love you, Dani."

"I love you too."

Friday

Father and daughter sat across from each other at the kitchen counter. Heather, a nursing student, folded laundry in the dining room. Dad called her Julia. He also called his social worker Julia. They had stopped correcting him. Pretty soon, the whole staff would be Julia. It was just easier that way.

“Thanks for eating lunch with your old man,” he said, nudging Dani’s leg playfully with his toe. This was their secret body language, and the body doesn’t forget.

But he wasn’t that old. That was the tragedy. An associate professor, he was barely sixty-one when he began forgetting colleagues’ names, failing to turn up to dissertation defenses, losing his temper with students. He was forced to take early retirement after an unblemished forty-year career. There was no party.

Dani reflected on the cruel irony that a man who used to backpack in Patagonia and scuba dive in the Galapagos could no longer leave his own house without supervision. He required the familiarity of those walls. At least for now, he knew where they began and ended and where all the doors led to. It was the only landscape he understood, the only one he had left.

A year ago, the floor-to-ceiling bookshelves of the library were organized by topic and then by author’s last name. Now books lay in piles on the floor, on the armchair, on the mantel over the fireplace. No wonder he kept misplacing his encyclopedias. The only uncluttered surface was the marble coffee table, which displayed an antique chess set.

“Care for a game?” Dani asked. She made it sound like a question, but she was under strict orders from his doctor. Mental stimulation couldn’t reverse his decline, couldn’t stop it, but it could slow it down. They settled into the oversized armchairs with their dark leather upholstery.

Dani moved her pieces around the board as one drives a car to a familiar location, without thinking. He had taught her to play before she was old enough to see over the dining room table. She used to be so frustrated when he won, again and again. Now, *she* was the teacher, reminding him that the rook can’t move diagonally, the pawn can’t move backward. Now, she’d give anything to see him win.

It was white’s turn. He was obliged to move a piece but had run out of options. Any move he made would put him in peril, and he knew it. She could see it in the tightening of his forehead as his eyes darted around the board, considering each doomed scenario. There was no way out.

“*Sheik-māt*,” he whispered in Arabic. “The king is dead.”

“I prefer the Persian *shāh māt*,” Dani countered. “The king is defeated, not dead. You taught me that.”

“I did?” He cocked his head, his brow softening again. “Well, now you’re teaching it to me.”

Dani knew the etymology was grimmer. In modern Persian, *mate* referred to someone without speech, catatonic even. Maybe she preferred the Arabic after all. At least there was a certainty in that. There was finality, an opportunity for closure, for grief. Game over. She swallowed hard.

He tipped the white king onto its side and extended his hand across the table.

“Julia, say goodbye to Dani,” he called. Heather leaned into the doorway and flashed a sympathetic smile.

Dani hugged him long and hard so that their embrace would be imprinted on her brain, so she could remember it even if he couldn't. *Because* he couldn't. Walking to the subway, she wondered if she was fated to end up just another Julia. She counted fifty-one paces before her phone vibrated in her coat pocket.

"Hi, Dad."

"I love you."

"I love you too."

Tuesday

Dani lay staring up at the ceiling for almost an hour before the device on the nightstand started to vibrate.

"Hi, Dad."

"Dani, thank God you picked up. My encyclopedia has gone missing..." his voice trailed off.

"Okay, Dad. But it's late. It's four in the morning. Can I call you tomorrow?"

A pause. "Okay." Click.

Dani glanced at the clock on the wall. One minute and nineteen seconds later, the device in her palm was still. She dialed him back. The ringing ceased, but there was silence on the line.

"Dad?"

"Dani?"

"I love you, Dad."

"I love you too."



Old Man and the Sea by Tyler McCurry



Circles Rachel Coyne

humans have tried to understand the nature of the poppy.
Poppy residue has been found on clay pottery in Neolithic settlements

she were a seed ground to a fine powder, a ritual bread.

Perhaps the poppy itself is a type of door.
the power to change life itself,

cradled in the arms woven crowns on the head,
poppies on others' graves.

The poppy lives at the threshold. nearly blue. life and death touched.

power to move between the lands of the living and the dead.
then christened the "stone of immortality."

poppies contain relief of pain is a mystery.
trigger our receptors as it crashes through feeling of euphoria our bodies have ever found a deeper

intelligence within nature. dormant for up to a hundred years.
defies our desire to contain it.



Peace Poppy by Cindy Rinne

On Reading a Blog Entry Disputing the Poetic Value of A. Gorman's "The Hill We Climb"

Smear on tablet. The grease. The chubby finger.
"This," Aunt says, "is your Grandma Amanda."

"Manda," she repeats, and it sounds like "Manna."
"Manna, Manna," she murmurs, soft, labial.

"She is a poet." Aunt's smile is just a quiver, internal.
"She once read..." Doorbell rings.

Draft of air across the long corridor. Ceiling
light turns on. Sharp, crude beam of -

"Yellow!" Finger smears on dress. On screen, tablet.
"A poet." "Pop," she repeats. Soft. Labial.

Upper lip. Lower lip. Kiss. Her own smile
exceeds eyes. Exudes, from external corners.

The two smiles, a cross-dissolve.
"Manna, a pop." Fingerprint on yellow.

Round red pillow-hat like a crown,
a buoy, a lifesaver.

Like a ring of Saturn, like Jupiter's
brightest moon.

Chubby finger on red.
Hold.

"Living," she will soon hear say,
"can be very dangerous."

Retaining

If these walls could talk,
we (who can and too often do)
are fond of saying – as though
anything in our sayings or doings

matters enough to red bricks and
cinder blocks that they might recall
(much less relate) the petty stories
of flesh and its foibles.

Shout your secrets, whisper your
litanies of nights misspent in illicit
arms and deals, chant your true
god's ineffable name;

these walls – of barrooms, ballrooms,
bedrooms – will bear your loads of
omission, commission and emission in
proverbial silence.

Only in demolition do they crack
and mutter, and no prophet might
be found to translate the old tongue
of rubble and dust.

Raíces

I know that my mother is looking over me
Even through hurricane winds my homestead remains untouched in her eyes
But the key was taken from me
Am I a bastard of a thing? Unrecognizable to its kin?

I find an open window and crawl through
Inside I smell arroz y gandules and my mouth waters
Looking through the kitchen I wonder: am I a monster if I don't like avocado?
I never enjoyed quenepas either
mushy in my mouth, and yet I still have a taste for the sweet juice.
Am I a bastard of a thing? Unrecognizable to its kin?

What a miracle it is to grow out of soil you were never planted in
Yet here I am, a palm tree in Cidra, letting gentle baths of rain pass over me
Saying hello to the mountains that I feel blessed to know as loved ones instead of strangers
Wondering if I would have grown taller planted at home

I am a mix match woodwork forged from eons of wombs ripped open, big ships with white sails and fangs
carried in utero
Interwoven with mother's milk island breezes, and coquí songs under twinkling starlight
Am I a bastard of a thing? Unrecognizable to its kin?

Looking out over the horizon
I hope Yemaya will welcome me with open arms
Even if I submerge from the shore as
Wading driftwood accidentally bruising shins
A bastard of a thing. Unrecognizable to its kin.
Empty handed but heart full
Floating in turquoise water that looks an icy gray, the aftermath of devastating hurricane winds

Hoping to be replanted home



Circles in the Sand by Maroula Blades

In a Clearing

~after Ezra Pound's "In a Station of the Metro"

i.

~ *silence*

I meant to remind myself beforehand:
cleave to (or let go of)

and merge into eternity.

But then the aspen leaves flickered.

ii.

~ *silence*

Sometimes standing still in sunshine
is like lying lovingly entwined in the clearing's tall grasses.

One's whole being is calm
as though in the afterglow
of orgasm.

iii.

~ *silence*

Crow, when you look down
upon my upturned face,

am I in a pond?
Have I become a lily pad?

Moment

“That’s not suffering,” the man said,
watching his son staring at the fish heads
gasping toward their own flayed bodies.
“That’s just life, trying harder than we’d like.”

Conversations in the Red Car

Translated by Toshiya Kamei

I

My coffee was lukewarm, yours was scorching hot. My icy lips touched the cappuccino to release the remaining heat. Sometimes I could be an iceberg.

II

Thinking hurts, you said. And in the end, both coffees turned cold. Living doesn't hurt as much as thinking. Being alone with yourself for so many hours forces you to go back to the memory that twists from the foundations to the top of its column and makes a strange noise like concrete buildings swaying in the polar wind. You don't stop suffering while your head turns around and around the issues that don't really have answers and that will chase you for the rest of your life: little monsters lying in wait when you cross the sidewalk, when you turn the corner or when the day turns off, when the door closes to swallow you. I know remembering me cuts you, splits you in two: the one you should be and the one you want to be. I make you happy, I cause you to dream, be free, and to unleash all of your infinite possibilities, to put them in your hand without fear, like a freshly cut rose, still alive, breathing.

But you must admit I'm a savage in your world. I'm always on the other side of the wall, in the lines of the path no one steps on, in the lost aroma of morning bread or in the clouds that dream of rain at night.

III

Maybe you shouldn't listen to me. Maybe you should finish your coffee alone. Nor should you think I was a postcard from a distant place that suddenly slipped through the window of the car and crashed into your face, when you seemed to have seen it all; except the sea that came to look for you to wet your neck to leave a grain of salt on your tongue and its stories at the root of your mind. I can also spread fear, cold, and words.

Conversaciones en el coche rojo

I

Mi café está tibio, el tuyo ardiente. Mis labios fríos tocaron el capuchino para desprender el resto de calor que quedaba. A veces puedo ser un iceberg.

II

Pensar hace daño, eso decías; y el café a final de cuentas no terminó de enfriarse. Vivir no duele tanto como pensar. Estar así, tantas horas contigo mismo te hace ir a la memoria que se retuerce desde los cimientos hasta lo alto de su columna y hace un ruido extraño como el de los edificios de concreto que se mueven con el viento polar. No dejas de sufrir mientras la cabeza da vueltas y vueltas a los asuntos que en realidad no tienen respuesta y que te perseguirán por el resto de la vida: pequeños monstruos que te esperan al cruzar la acera, al doblar la esquina o mientras se apaga el día, cuando cierra la puerta para tragarte. Yo sé que recordarme te corta, te parte en dos: el que debes ser y el que quieres ser. Yo te hago feliz, te llevo a soñar, a ser libre y desatar las posibilidades infinitas para ponerlas en tu mano sin miedo, igual que una rosa recién cortada todavía viviente, respirando.

Pero debes reconocer que yo en tu mundo soy salvaje y que estoy siempre del otro lado de la pared, en las líneas del camino que nadie pisa, en el aroma perdido del pan de la mañana o en las nubes que de noche sueñan con la lluvia.

III

Tal vez no debas escucharme y terminar tu café solo, pensar que fui una postal de un sitio lejano que de pronto se coló por la ventanilla del coche y se estrelló en tu rostro, cuando parecías haberlo visto todo; excepto el mar que vino a buscarte para mojar tu cuello y dejarte un grano de sal en la lengua y abandonar sus historias en la raíz de tu mente. Yo también puedo contagiar el miedo, el frío y las palabras.

Chameleon

Don't listen

When they tell you to change on command, become whatever they want, magically, instantly transforming to fit their blind vision.

Your skin sheds in bits and pieces, and your cells won't stop dividing.

Camouflage has been called the defense of the defenseless. But I see your face contoured in a palette of primer and stain, and your eyes edged with clarity.

You sense the snake approaching, your panoramic eyes sweeping over the slayer's flexible jaws and forked tongue. Make the colors shift; become silent, somber, shadowed. Make the body still. Let the mind race.

But don't forget who you are
or define yourself by what you are not.

You say you cannot
shoot blood out of your eyes like the Texas horned lizard, or run on water like the basilisk.
You say you are not
fast, not
strong, not
poisonous.

You say you have no
bite, no
sting, no
spray.

You think your only hope is to hide, and pray that no one finds you.

But the foundation of your spirit is cracking. Emotions seep through your skin, pigments rising to the surface. Black is the color of cold and fear, while bright blue and red mean excitement. Your favorite is green, happiness, but I haven't seen green in a while.

You equate survival with invisibility
but sometimes I wonder
What happens if you disappear to yourself?

In your solitude, search.

Search for the bones that glow in the dark. Search for the tiny, iridescent crystals, reflecting like mirrors in the sun. Search for the four-layered skin, the skin that has kept you alive. Examine it from the inside out – absorption, obscurity, illumination, protection.

Let light slip through the slits of reality. Let magic leak in, calmly, quietly, even if you're the only one who sees it.

Human Nature

The birds are back. The sun killed the snow. The tide is rising. That's all I know.

First quarter, full moon

The edge of the cliff collapses beneath my feet. I catch sight of the ghost, catching up, can't catch my breath, crumbling.

Adenine, cytosine, guanine, thymine. The strands are held together by dust. The space inside me fractures until all that's left is fire, spiraling into tiny fractals.

The sky is swallowed up.

Last quarter

New moon



Maine Coast by K. Carlton Johnson

Some Have Entertained Unawares

Today, I found penguins
waiting for me outside my door.
They had migrated north
in the belly of an airliner,
willing themselves a sanctuary
from collapsing ice shelves.
I had no word
for their language of desperation.

I should have been ready
to make them feel at home.
But how could I know
penguins would learn to fly
using airline loyalty points?

Too late, they faded into
the black and white
of a repetitious morning newspaper.

When you least expect him,
the beggar of infinity appears
in the guise of penguins.
If you do not let him in,
six more weeks of nuclear winter
will fall in burning snow.

Ode to the Hoatzin Bird

We're waiting for the poet who dares to write an ode for the hoatzin. Bing

Skunkbird. Stinkbird. Riparian forest menace
of the Amazon. She digests mangrove leaves
with a gut of enzymes that ferment the food that
releases manure odor. Claws on wing digits.
Praise this foul fowl for her tufts of cowlick hair,
maroon eyes, fan of feathers, muted hues of copper
when she flies. Adore the sooty-brown tail.
When she clambers clumsily on branches, know
she is the high priestess with hoarse calls, groans
and hisses and her birdline branched off
to survive the extinction of dinosaurs.
When the rainforest disappears, she will be laughing
on the last branch chewing the last leaf
catching the last shine of sun. With no false acts
she is the talisman of the riverine, frescos
of blue on her face, reluctant to flush her feathers
but eager to croak to grunt like a saxophone
like newlyweds exploring love.

How to Make a Scarecrow

Don't make her mean, painted red with fangs. No claws or shotgun. No scarred lips dripping blood, but a smile wide enough to say *Get off the carrot shoots*. No lavish with ecstatic blue blazer. No pillbox hat fashionably pink. You're not turning the church inside out and you're not dressing up humanity with Hitler's slippers. Shock begins with straight arms, a father's shirt checkered like his past. Scare lasts only so long.

How to fight the Mean Mother within you that wants to kill the little-shit birds. How many hours did you till the soil, rake in compost you had turned all winter in the rain and your back, aching from yanking roots and weeds in that raised bed, the heart of your garden, what about that ache that keeps you awake? No tea rose in the scarecrow's dimples. No larkspur in her hair. You must decide if her hands shake hands with death.

If a bird lands on her shoulders, will you have covered them with Tanglefoot, that sticky goo that traps ants—yes, that peckerwood bird stuck above the young shoots frantically chirping, music to you? What if the bird is an uncle reborn as a crow? He wasn't your favorite uncle. Listen to him screech. He'll die. Reborn as a rat. You'll trap him. Reborn as a mosquito. You'll zap him in the bug zapper. You hammer nails. Adjust her pants—electric lime. Call her Miss Fancy Pants. Now who is eating crow.

Unity

The calligrapher moves the brush gently on the paper
The blue night sky rises behind him
A steady breeze moves up his back
A bird takes flight in the distance
The bird flows red, gold, and pink, turning and turning over in the air

The calligrapher sits still
He does not speak, but listens to the brush's sound move back and forth across the page
He finds his rhythm
As gold paint ripples in between his fingers
And letters spin out from his thin hands
He closes his eyes for a moment and breathes

He is quiet
As the breeze travels across the room and touches the lake outside
Gentle waves of water unfold as ribbons across the earth
The clouds flow in all directions in the sky
Fish disperse, they scatter, yet find a way to reemerge and journey again together

The calligrapher sips tea
From a black pottery cup
He watches the letters he has formed rise up and keep rising in the night air
The letters ripple in and among the gold on his fingers, the letters are no longer separate from his hands
They are carried further upwards by the breeze
Returning to the source of light

February

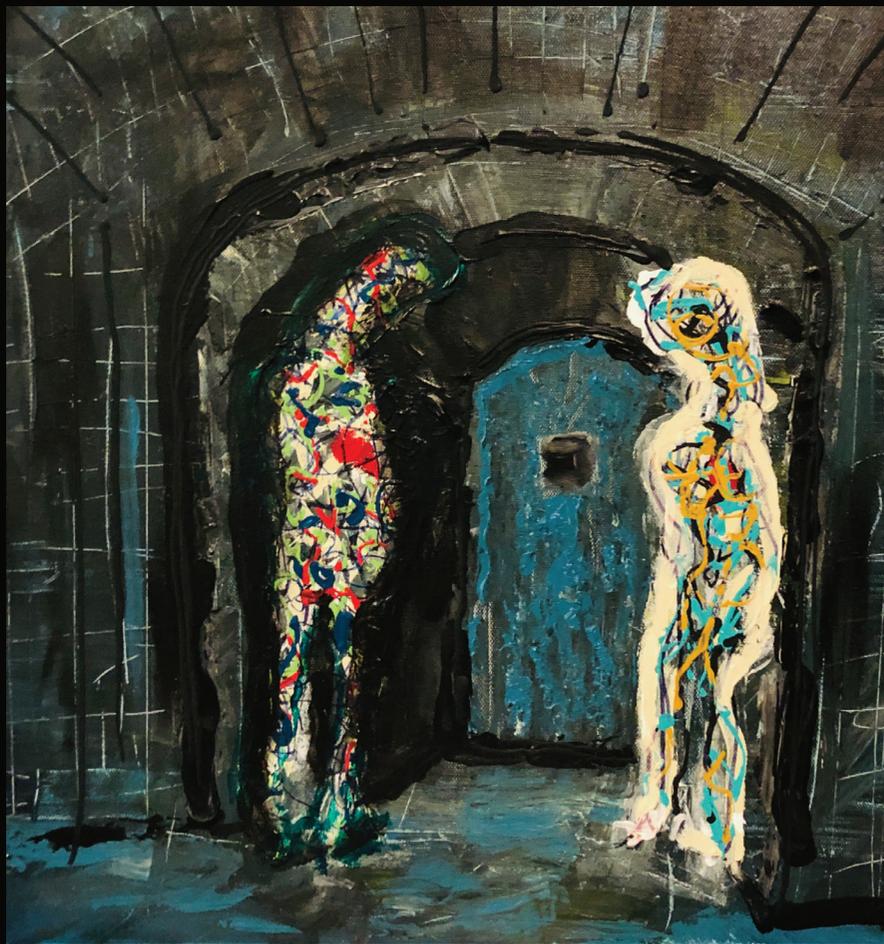
When the drugs wear off
I can't stand the blue.
The darkness either,
curled around Seattle
like an obsessive thought
the clouds can't shake
from their crystal minds.
Winter is a compulsion.
The earth pulled into itself
after the endless party of summer.
The introverted trees
dropping their green
for somber contemplation
and the rivers, all flowing
nonchalance, suddenly caught
in a static posture,
harmless and rib-cracking
until spring returns
with the possibility of drowning.
I'm not myself, or maybe more myself,
than in any other season.
My New England childhood cannot be extracted.
It lives inside me, waiting for the wind
to crack its eyes awake
and reveal the truth
of all that's frozen.

Manifesto

Forget the past. Don't worry about where you're going.
You're in the bardo baby, the Kali Yuga,
and there's no time to waste.
The whales beach themselves
and the color drains from the reefs.
The light and soul of the world
is flicking her cards in grief.
Or is it a wink and challenge,
a call to meet the depths?
Drop your yesterdays
and don't build your tomorrows.
The wilderness is all around you.
Your compass will not do, and the tigers
ate your map. Tear off your boots
and press your feet
into the red-blooded earth.
If it rains, you'll learn the
language of water.
If it's a drought
you'll become the desert wind.
Transformation and desire
is the name of the game. Turn your cheek
and kiss the other.



Hello Goodbye (left)
Ritual Dance (top right)
Figures by a Chamber Door (bottom right)
by Steven Ostrowski



My Father's Picture

No matter where I am
or what I'm doing
it comes around again.
It was twenty-five years ago
this month. I remember it automatically
like a birthday or the day Kennedy
was assassinated. My internal clock
stops ticking for a moment,
the world is suspended in February,
in death's snowy silence.
This year I surrounded myself
with a family photo gallery
frames of silver and gold
with faces of the dead,
arranged them on shelves,
displayed them on dressers
someone for each room;
my mother's high school glamour shot,
Aunt Dixie when she was heavier,
Grama in a swirl of lily white curls.
Sometimes our eyes make contact,
sometimes they follow me
as I lumber around this house.
At first, you weren't included
I couldn't look at you
without the weight of fear
bearing down on me,
without falling into that well of shame.
Why, dad? I must have asked myself
a million times. Why?
I finally found a frame
a concrete brick-like square
strong enough to hold you;
your thinning hair
soft as slippers on your forehead
your tinted glasses as dark as tattoos
cigar wheedling conversation
from one hand.
Now, when I come into the room
we look at one another
and live with the answers.

Birds-of-Paradise

The second sexual selection mechanism, which he (Darwin) called the taste for the beautiful, concerned the process by which the members of one sex—often female—chose their mates on the basis of their own innate preferences.

-Richard O. Prum, The Evolution of Beauty

If we don't need food
because the fruit's a-plenty
If what we seek are children
hale in a paradise understory
Then what we'll choose is gazing
at those boughs across the lekking.

Shine me those metallic feathers
we'll sister-shriek a chorus song.
Feather-bed me on your Royal drape
of sweeping purple covers.
Come a-courting with that curly tail
the color of the heavens.
Green-light me that aqua-breasted lovely one
since we agree, unilaterally, he's got the booty
best passed along.
Let's share him equally with a lively song
his cute little dervish
in black tutu attraction.

His good-natured buddies will whole-heartedly agree
his coy bouffant is the best for polygyny.
His luminous beauty we'll hand down on this tropical New Guinea
high in the canopy of the paradise trees.





Camouflage 2 (left) Two Dead Leaves-Norway (above) by Roger Camp

Sequitur

But felt: somewhere someone
who could make a way seem clear
or with an eye toward placement,

Put a colon there:

And sought the terror for salt
to melt a trace that one may walk,
or with an antic gesture

Clear away one's faults,

And looked around for lodging
at such uncertain hour,
but fixed no one who wanted

So practical a power.

And nowhere found a map
to burn a path toward laughter
or find, the first line sifted,

What's left; what follows after.

Typeface

No need to pretend, to feign, or even align yourself as understood. I understand you. I have loved you long before the Sumerians even learned to write. Before display font and body copy. Before sans everything. Every soul swirls so many things, all the runes of diaries. Every soul sings page upon page, wall of words, birds each in a cage. The book could flap its wings. It could nest in some Cyrus Cylinder, and let time run through it in generations of eggs. And later open like a chime in the breeze, all its symbolic logic and complexities and yet be just as free as first etched into being. It sounds like hard work over tedious time. Yet, much ease. You shall find that the more you write yourself, the more you need to just give in to being written. And then the writing is not about writing inasmuch as it is about living, in all its wondrous ways of font and character.

Meeting Minutes

When Bill scans the agenda to gauge
just how much longer this gab-fest
could possibly linger, he measures the future
not by the yard, furlong, or rod
nor by the phase of the moon
but by the phrase, the symbols he decodes.
When Bill says that actuality isn't a word,
he reveals the vein of distrust of language
pulsing through American thought, but Bill
doubles down to say that if actuality
really is a word it shouldn't be.
What he means is that if aardvark
is a skyscraper, then the minutes
should reflect that. If Bill were to phrase it
in the form of a motion, I think he thinks
swamp gas would illumine a road-map,
and then it would, in all actuality,
teach a chair leg the pentatonic scale.
If the meeting minutes reflect only
what is decided not all that is discussed,
then they should be minute
and we should meet them with grace.
When Bill sighs, "You believe this?"
I think he's suggesting that the Upanishads
have started to drift in his blood stream
crowding out hemoglobin and squeezing through
all the cholesterol he doesn't even know
is spelling out his most intimate sentence.



Epistemology

Icebergs are armed
with the density
of their own presence.

Surprisingly, some components
of the automobile
have poetic names:
serpentine belt,
harmonic balancer,
windshield.

Every couple of weeks
at the start of The Who's "Eminence Front,"
John Entiwhisle sends up a single
air-filled bass note like a beach ball

but later he whiplashes
through the refrain.

Painting golf balls means
counting all those dimples,
and fitting yourself into them,
one by one.

No matter how many years
I've spent watching TV
I get no better at it.

Sea otters swim on their backs,
harbor seals on their bellies.

Setting Our House on Fire

Perhaps it was the god who saved the chickens.
Perhaps it was the titan

Promethean ambition. An intellect
sparking like propane,

crawling over deserts, wild as wind in chaparral, laddering the canopy to crown.
Perhaps it was the furnace of our failed imaginations

careless as the lightning chained to mischief, whirling with the force of black
tornadoes.

Who rested from the gods this scorched and stolen future?
Darkness fell

on standing dead, in snags, on blistered bark, the cheatgrass over-
wintered, the dense mats of the old-world fern invading ever-
glade.
Lost everything,

a woman says, in scorched debris outside the trailer. Ferocious flames
tunneling at a rate of 30 football fields per minute.

Swagger of Wind

I have nested in the eaves of homesteads sinking
like old men into their joints. I have bided my time
in dust of neglect, burst from rafters in a chaos

of birds. It's nothing for me to spread what might
be arms and take in half the earth or graze the skin
of summer fields that rock like bodies of water. I am

all that crosses the sky, that is blizzard or vanishing
road. If families flee underground from storm
if lovers lean into gusts from the bay, I don't feel

panic or share their vision of days they will brace
against together. I have nothing to say about
dread or hope, the importance of everyone

huddling close. I'm relentless as the gods you had
as children, bearing witness to species extinction, oil
fields burning, deserts of war at the heart of combustion.

Dor

The moment I step off the KLM flight on JFK, I stumble on the tarmacked runway, peering at the low sun, and my chest squeezes like a broken accordion, the air feels old and new,

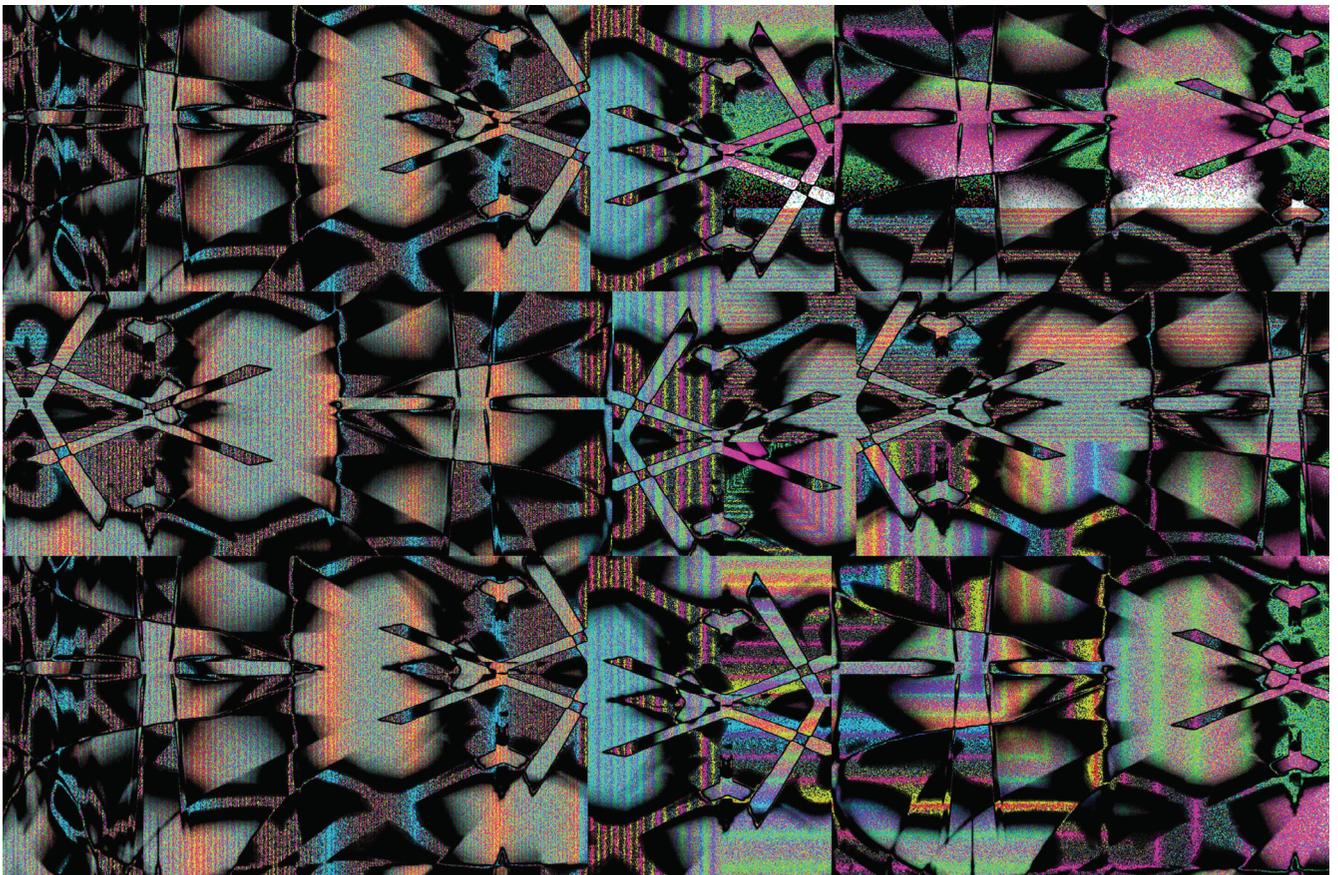
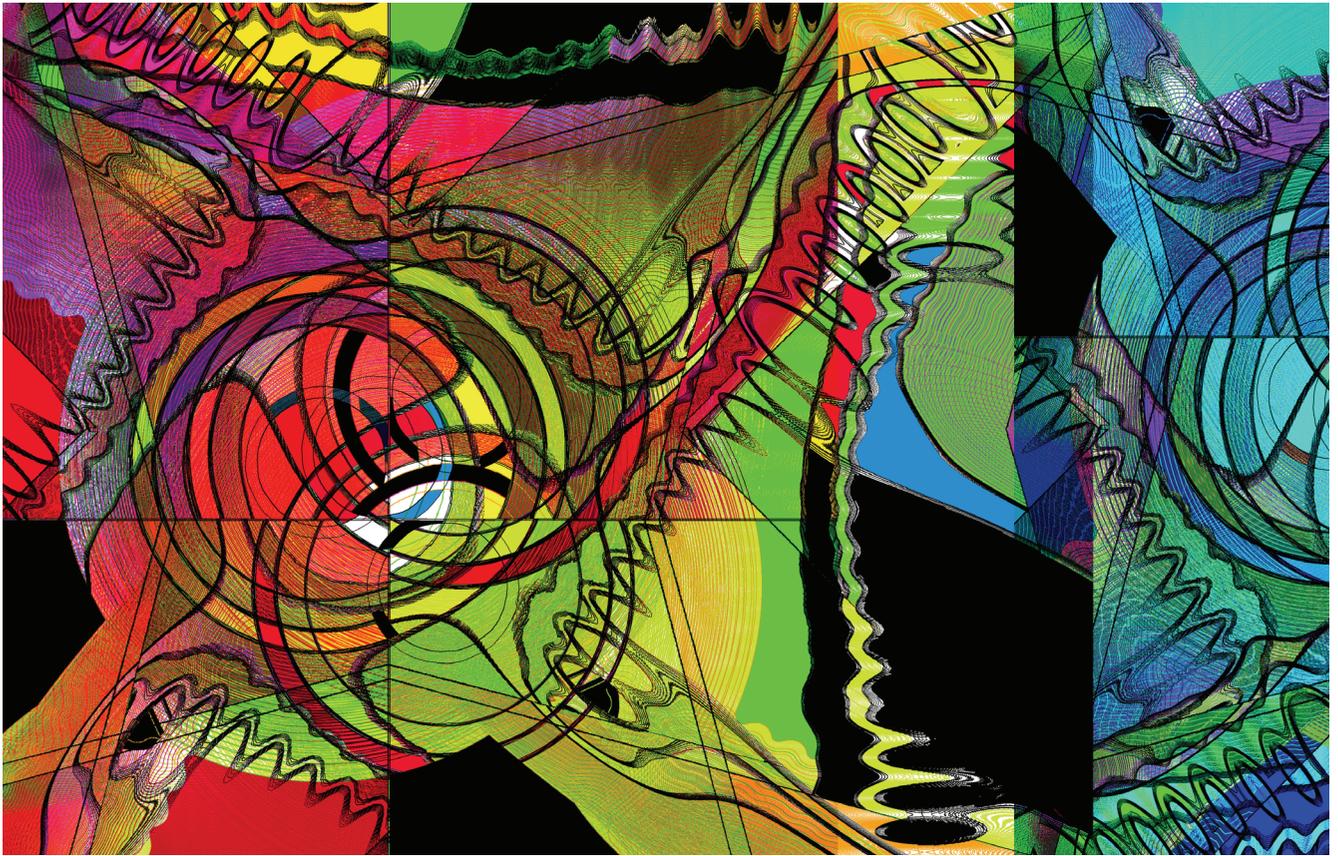
and I am once again in between worlds, worried sick for the two kids at home, yet awed by you, NY, I can smell you from afar, one beast chasing another, will you bow your bountiful bosom

and pour words into my mouth, let me hang on your every gaze, crush my ribs in your famished grip, will I fold into a portmanteau of stifled dreams or soar six feet above your crowded

sidewalks, all grit and brisk. A crescent moon is lodged outside the window of the Terminal 2 bus, yellow tongue sliding down my cheeks. The tall sky, a bed stripped of sheets, awaiting.



Legs with Bare Feet by William Crawford



Drifting Night 2 (above) Seeking Solace (below) by Edward Supranowicz



Games by K. Carlton Johnson

Scrape the Fear from My Name

You held me in your mouth, a perfect matchbox pilfered from a kitchen drawer, all rustle and strut, winging your breath, and I couldn't quicken or strain from your moist tongue, *God chose me for this*, you whispered, better swim, bobbing up and down over my words, make a summer out of my roof, flower by flower, hold the crackling hum of a storm on the tip of my tongue, the deep breathing of the daily world, close, the cambium, sapwood, and heartwood of every tall tree scratching the back of my teeth, something the wind picked up and done away with, a seed peppering the dirt, the muscular logic of a piece of food dissolving, before I spit you out, let's gum the inside of my cheeks with the flavor of you, this bankruptcy of light, too much to endure.

Lullaby

The last flames are on the trees, but that
is nothing now, for those will fall
and anyway, night's here, damped down
with fog swept off the sea. Your feet
are the only ones to touch pavement,
your breath the only breath. Silent,
you step around the streetlight's cone,
the dazzled motes that sparkle there.
And all the world is nothing now, the noise
and strident life. You alone are All, secure,
wrapped in the moss soft nest of night

Forgive Me

help me rest these aching palms
atop your weeping scalps—mine have
suffered long enough with this nagging cough,
this blistering itch, this dreadful winter
white. let me dance knotted toes
along the finish of your tumescent bellies
I have long filled with food. take these
burdened balls and riddled insteps
along the green hillsides of your ribs
and buttocks so I may be restored once more
to a boy running hard with pigskin
and ancient friends through our father's toiled fields—
and then to a young man with limb enough
to lift from the grave a dead lover
before placing her atop a bed forged
of ritualistic cotton. we prefer nothing more
to do with this rickety frame—
oh so splotched and merciful. pardon, then,
all previous impropriety with prayer
and indigenous jig. lick these sores,
mend the king's rings that have promoted
your guts since the beginning of time. if you must
cry, please do so in our mouths where
we may drink the juice of you and recall
decayed flavors of diffident ghosts.

Silence Has Its Own Economy

Think fair trade. Barter. Leave your sledge hammer
in the shed. The too-short silent prayer in church hastens

pass-the-basket collection. Take an ice-water cure
for the throat that swallowed dusted lies. Enjoy the free sniff

of clean laundry on the line. Rejoice when the best of quiet
wags the dog's tail with joy because you've come home.

Sigh when the party is almost over. You don't have to count
syllables. Astonish your translator. Let quiet be

clear water that falls from the sprinkling can
on the newly planted petunia. Never conflate it

with death. Be silent when you want to be.
For free.

The Gestalt of It All

My cousin offers me sheaves of Crane's
writing papers. *Be your cousin. Be the paper.*
Take wing wherever the crane would fly. I know

the words on the page are mine and they're fine.
Remember this: the I is your least reliable narrator.
I reconfigure time and present the folio to my mother.

She balloons above me, a vengeful Fury. *What
do you see through your mother's eyes?* She screams
How dare you! Dare you! *Do you perceive a leitmotif?*

In less than a breath I declare an end to shriveling,
inflate myself, and shout, Dare I what? What? *When
does one see the soul speak to itself?* She slaps me across

the face. I quickly slap her back. *Could you feel
the slap on your palm, on her face?* I tell her she must
start paying attention, the words on the page are good words.

Is this more than the state of the state? I know
I don't have to stay; she can't hurt the words. I wake
to the gray of the day. *What were the colors of the dream?*

Sisyphus Pushes a Rock Up a Hill in Hades

Why would we need Camus to tell us that Sisyphus is happy?

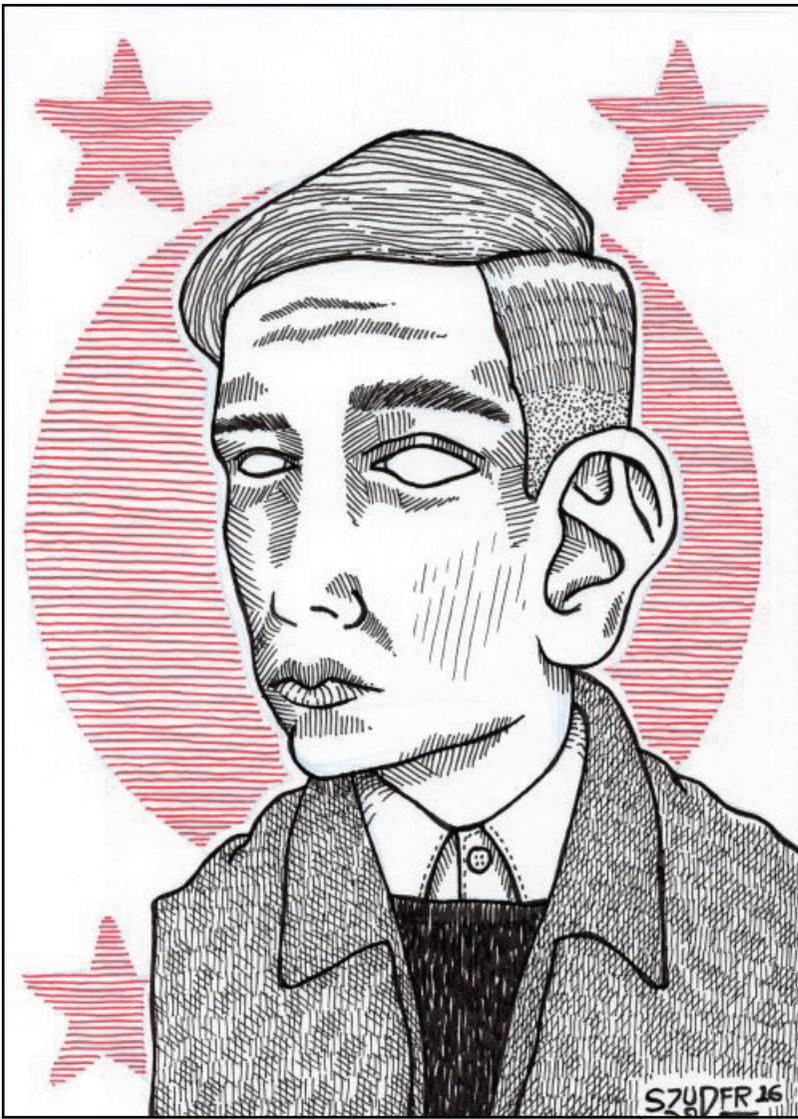
Why wouldn't he be? He has almost no responsibility. No bleary-eyed insomnia worried about affording Adidas sneakers for his kids, so they won't need costly therapy for fractured self esteem. No five hundred dollar Comcast bill for a WiFi that spits and sputters during Zoom calls with his cantankerous boss. No Prius needing a four thousand dollar battery in order to schlep the kids to school, to soccer, to Spanish, to swim. Precisely the same four thousand saved for a laid-back summer on the beaches of Cape Cod. Sisyphus is never gobsmacked with surprises. No gophers digging up his peonies and petunias. Nothing like my son's report card dotted with D's. Nothing like the doctor frowning at the shadow on my MRI. Every day dittos the one before. No meals to plan, *please no chicken again, I hate tofu, Talia's mother buys Captain Crunch*. His rock steadfast and stable. It doesn't grow nose hairs and a flabby belly. It doesn't suddenly develop an interest in learning Latin on Tuesday nights.

Today I resigned. I simply resigned. Left a note on the table. *Gone Straight to Hell*.
And drove to Home Depot to pick out the perfect rock.

Wales, UK, 1950

after a photograph by W. Eugene Smith

These three men up from the mines,
faces black under their tilted caps.
They glance sideways
somerly at something. One with a cigarette
between his lips. All wearing jackets
against the cold. They stand before
their houses where inside there are coal buckets,
coal that blackens the walls.
Remove a picture, and it
will leave its outline. How
do the sinks get clean?
They are doing the work
their fathers did, the labor
they have always known,
deep in the shadowed earth.
Already they know hell
and are not threatened by it.
They carry the soot of fire without fire.
Foreheads now creased.
Once they were boys who knew
only the surface of the ground,
the hills, the green, sometimes snow falling.



2016_20 (top)
2018_05 (bottom)
by Jeremy Szuder



SZUDFR 21

2021_14 by Jeremy Szuder