

AFTER HAPPY HOUR

A JOURNAL OF LITERATURE AND ART



ISSUE 13 | FALL 2020

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HOUR
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PIA BHATIA

FOREWORD

Thanks for picking up Issue 13 of *After Happy Hour*, the second issue from our new masthead. This issue brings a new category into the picture: Suites. The idea behind suites is to explore narratives constructed of smaller bits that together make a larger, synergistic whole. There are narratives beyond the linear approach we typically see in prose. Whether it's a thematic arc, emotional arc, or the unfolding of a motif, the suites aim to celebrate narratives that don't rely on chronology to get from A to B.

Putting together a literary journal can be a great exercise in that, too. We're not necessarily selecting just the best pieces in front of us but art that works together to create a full experience—sometimes, intentionally, sometimes by pure luck. Issue 13 feels like it has that completeness to me.

This issue, of course, came together as 2020 unfolded for all of us. The start of our reading period coincided almost precisely with the beginning of nationwide quarantines and lock-downs. Tight out of the gate we received a slew of Covid-19 submissions, of which we accepted none. It felt too soon. This was something that needed to mature, because it was a turning point so far beyond knee-jerk reaction.

At that point we were just learning about the murder of Breonna Taylor. George Floyd and , and dozens more murdered by police were still alive, as were over 200,000 Americans and over 1 million people worldwide killed by COVID-19. and we weren't terrified to hug a friend or be 10 feet away from someone without a mask.

As the year's events intensified and dragged on, we started matching submitters' donations to Bukit Bail Fund. We were thrilled to reach our goal of matching \$500 in August (thank you to all the authors who submitted donations with their work!) and that inspired us to keep it going into the Issue 14 reading period and beyond.

And, gradually, those early COVID-19 submissions stopped. In fact, after a certain point, almost no submissions we received were topical. It's a difficulty I struggled with in my own writing, and I think it plays out in this issue: When everything is so big, so immediate, so desperate, how do you approach it? How do you keep writing when you know you have to write about it in some way, but you're still in the midst of it, and you don't even know how or where your work fits anymore?

The pieces in this issue aren't about COVID or current politics; they retreat into reflections of the past, into pastoral idylls, into myth, magic, and the surrealism of dreams, into introspection and delusion. But while doing so, they still speak in terms we're all grappling with: isolation, death, fear of our bodies and others', immobility, resentment, and the conspicuous absence of the present day that keeps reminding us, over and over, of a past lost to us now and maybe forever, and the uncertainty of our present and future.

Through it all, it's a privilege to keep up a platform for people to share their writing, and at least in that regard we look forward to what the future brings with all the authors we will get to work with for Issue 14, whatever that may look like. Stay safe, and be kind.

Shawn Maddey
poetry editor



Menu

BY COLE DEPUY

L'Apéritif

endoscopy results:
ulcers -like olive pits

L'Entrée

a visit from mom:
you called slurring you words again
one bite of clam chowder is all

Le Plat Principal

vinegar:
buffalo wings, raw oysters, salad dressing
chased with beer, anti-acids & Xanax

Le Fromage

in detox:
pre-wrapped ham & cheese
sandwiches, pocketed mozzarella sticks
& perscription omepezole

Le Dessert

six months sober:
three energy drinks, a tub of chocolate ice cream,
a bag of sour worms until the stomach
is sugar glass

Le Café

a sip of espresso:
the door between your stomach
& esophagus sticks open, your insides
whisper & finds lips

Le Digestif

a swig of whiskey:
the knot in your stomach loosens
you salivate, excuse yourself & flush
simultaneously with the vomit

The Naturalist

BY HENRY BULE

May 14

Samson is teaching me to write. I have my letters and my grammars. He says I still miss my voice. I always knew my voice to be in these lungs I got, but he means my voice on the paper. He tells me its like with my logging.

“You cut down the tree,” he says to me. “Now you gotta saw the wood and carve it.”

I told him thats what the miller down river near Oswayo does. We only chop them down and ship them, I say. He just laughs.

May 20

I worried about Nick finding out I was reading and writing, but he tells me as long as it aint get in the way of my high climbing then he dont mind. The other men get a kick out of me writing letters for them. They tell me what to say and I put it down. Huck says he never took me for a colledg fellow but here I am. No fancy Boston schooling or nuthing.

So I write in this book Samson got me. He dont check my spelling no more and I like that. He told me to write what ever I want to now, and that is what I do.

May 29

Samson says if I read as fast as I drank then there would be no more books in the whole of Pennsilvenya left for me. That made me laugh since there is hardly a bottle of rum left in any where these days. The droughts got our wagon boys bringing nuthing but the barest goods to the lumber camp. Rope and hay and the slim water we need to live remainder off the



VAN LANIGH

land. But McHenry claims his hands wont stop shaking till his next sip, and he aint talking water. Not a good happening for an axeman.

On the briter side, felling trees has never been none easier. The dry wood saws like butter and climbing through the canopy is now a breez. These days us men is looking less like the forest and the forest is looking more like us. All its pine needles outcoloring even the brownest beards in camp. I swear I might mistake Nick for a hemlock with that liney hole in his cheek. The foreman looks more wrinkled than a peach pit, cept Huck jokes that ole accident only made him prettier.

You dont see much pretty face this far upstate. Samson says he sure dont mind but he shaves his face like he wants to be one. I told him his jaw would be ayching come winter. He might be rethinking his clean chin then. Samson just laughs like he always does. Says he likes his chin better this way. Perhaps I do too.

June 4

“Charlie-boy, you better look after this pantywaister.” Thats what Nick tells me the day Samson first came to camp. “Dont want them bears to start thinking we gone and left out food for em.”

The foreman says that Samson dont know neer as much about the woods as he thinks he do, and thats why I am to keep my eyes on him. Samson had come with letters from the Oswayo sheriff and from some Filadelfia school that told he was here the whole season to study the woods or some such. The boys and I joked he must have a letter from the foreman’s mama too.

Samson dont seem to mind tailing me. Surely asked a lot of questions but I knew most answers. I showed him each our jobs and tools and splained to him the lumber yard day to day works. I showed him how we cut and saddled wood to the wagon sleds our bull teams pull to the river. I learned him the difference between a cant hook and a pickaroon. Would you believe I even had to show the silly man how to hold an axe.

Though I spose I dont mind much neither. He always gives due where dues are due, making me feel smart when we both know I was only built

for chopping wood.

When I got more wondering about his busines, Samson ofered to teach me reading and writing in return for all my helping. Figured I would need some thing to do with my nights if there was no more drinking by the fire.

June 7

Me and the men brought down a big haul today. It was nearly seven sleds worth. The horses kicked up so much dust and needles that Elijah went to go sick by the river. Most other fellows are sat beside me as I write this. They counting their days splinters by the fire now that the sun is nearly low the treeline.

Samson is cross from me and looking at one of his beetles. He has a whole jar of them collected from felled trunks. Me and the men never paid much mind to them buggers, cept when theyed sneak up our sleeves while climbing. Itchy bastards.

Samson is one of them educated sience men. Cant think of the word he calls it, but he knows lots about the trees and critters that even us woodsmen dont.

“Sound it out with me,” Samson will always say. Heering that only makes me stammer his big words worse. Fy lum? Speesees? Foto sin teses?

“Lord knows I got those letters more screwed than scrambled eggs,” I tell him. “And I only sound stupider trying to say them so slow.”

“Slow doesnt mean stupid, Charlie.” Course he says this in that quick hoity acsent of his. “Some rivers are slow but they get where they are going, dont they?”

Not sure why Samson bothers with me. My river aint going no where.

June 11

Lost a fellow yester day. One of the ole water hogs named Morgan. “Mudcake Morgan” by the boys who knew him best. They say one minut he was hooking some stray log through a swift current and the next he was gone. Seems the boys still hoping to find his body at least. The river aint nearly as tall as it once was. Maybe if luck were a lady they might,

but any woodhick with enough years under his belt would tell ya there aint no ladys in these hills.

Samson dont say much when we was toasting to Mudcake that eve by the fire. I got the sense he was spooked. Some of the fellows saw the opportun to push Samson's buttons a bit. They spun some mighty fine stories of them Fearsome Critters roaming these lumberwoods. Critters that jump ya when leest expecting. Cept Samson saw through it all like a priest through a sinner. He dont even fall for the sidehill gouger and thats always been a favorit of mine.

I ofered Samson the very last of my rum I did, but he says he dont drink. Either way not sure any licor at all was left in camp after that night.

June 13

I found myself a nice stump to sit while I write. I can see the river from here and the whole valley too. The forest has worn a tall copper hat all month, like the trees are dying from the tops down. You would almost think they was candlesticks lit but wittling real slow in the heat.

Foreman thought to remind us that the dry wood was easier on the bull teams and sawed easy at the mills down river. Samson told me that cutting the standing dead wood also helped snuf fires before they could happen. Maybe they both right. I never been to the mill and I never seen a wild fire before. All I know is the men are feeling even dryer than the forest these days. McHenry up and left with the wagon boys. Says it aint worth working with no rum for company.

The licor drought has left me feeling none too fine neither. Cant sleep a wink and I find I am rolling in my bunk more and more. I seen my fair share of Samson's drawings, mostly leaves but also bugs and birds. I would say I feel like one of them beehives in his book. All this buzzing round an empty husk. Samson sure knows how to make those drawings come to life.

June 20

The fellows been making lotta noise about Samson following me round all hours. I think the dry must be going to their heads. I says to them they

make no sense since I be climbing trees and chopping wood damn near all day. They dont know how to listen.

When I go high climbing there aint a soul up there but me. I got my ropes and hooks and I got my axe, but I am the only thinking thing up there, cept maybe the sqwirrels and the birds. Not sure if they can preciate the view same as me. When the wind catches you at the right moment it can make you feel like a pair of wings. Its colder at the tree tops too, never mind being nearer the sun. Sometimes that makes me wonder. If heaven really is upwards like they all say it is, I can only guess why God would make us men so short and them trees so tall.

Boys on their first season is always impresed by my nerve when it comes to topping trees. Seems to me its got nuthing to do with nerve.

"You aint fraid of falling?" Tucker asked me once.

"Get back to helping the cook," I say with a kick in the rear, but that skinny chuck was surefooted. So I told him yes and I was fraid every time I threw on my calk boots to take a climb. "It makes me shake more than McHenry used to."

Sure enough that was a lie. As far as I conserved, lies kept stupid folks safe.

June 25

A tough scene played in the valley this morn. I was three trees topped on the day and breaking till my fourth when I hears a mighty bellow from up hill. Little Wesley, not two seasons to his name, lost his grip and likely lost a leg. Whole trunk swept under him and the lad was caught like a... matter of fact I cant say it was like any thing I ever seen before.

Frank may say he just a cook but fighting for the Union learned him a thing or two about saving mens lives. The humble bastard threw down his only stew spoon to carry Wesley as far as the streams, measly as they were. I ran myself winded looking for Samson. Sience man like him ought know the trick to healing. Seems I was wrong though. I tell Samson the story with as many facts as I can think and dragging his hand the hole way to Wesley.

When we finally catch up to Frank, my Samson is shaking his head all molasses-like. "I cant help him," he says, looking harder for his voice than ever a man did. "There is too much blood, too much missing."

July 1

Huck asked me this morn if he was going mad. He had to shout since I was roped half a ways up a trunk and he was sitting on the ground. I just shook my head. Any logger with more years than rings on a redwood stump had a right to be a lunatic. Then again, any logger like that werent have asked to begin with.

"Am I crazy," is what he said, "Or do that look like a lass?"

I asked him, "You think any lass worth a haypenny would risk getting this close to you?"

The ole fellow nearly did choke on his wad of chaw at that. "No, but if she dont know me yet!"

So I look where he was fixing. Sure enough it was just a tree. Woodhick eyes were always seeing cunts where there was only trees. I even known men to have they way with too curvy a sycamore in the right hour of night. So I tells Huck he was seeing pink elephants again.

"I aint never seen a pink elephant before, Charlie-boy. This heres a lady." He was so sure he had me laughing in my perch.

Huck aint as dim as some other jacks but I still splain to him it was all in his head. Aint remember the word I admit, but he was seeing some thing that werent natural. Some thing that ole McHenry would see on a binge. Like a pink elephant.

"On the briter side," I tells him when I see him slump, "a real pink elephant ought be worth more than a haypenny."

Huck just grunted and tells me that a real lass would be worth more than either.

July 5

Foreman ordered us to quit panning from the river. "Gotta leave enough water to drive pitch our timber down stream," he told the camp while

fingering that scar of his.

Samson went and tolds him that made no sense and Nick damn nearly nailed him to a bunk. Cool as winter my Samson dusted it off no nuthings, but I could tell he was just wearing face. Later he tells me the river aint as safe as rain water anyway so it hardly matter. Only problem is I dont think its rained in all the time I been logging this here valley, and its nearing two years.

July 10

Boys dont want me writing them their letters no more. Like it was they never drank from my bottle. Like we aint never sung drunk every verse in Alouette and stamped our culk straight through the bunkhouse floor.

They was lusty fellows come stupor, same as all. I cant number the times I seen a man lend another logger some lonely hands. Now that the licors gone, seems like they start drawing a line between them and those pleasures.

Its expected for whole hillsides to forget their shape as we lay claim to timber. But things feel different with the river so low and our throats so dry. The world feels steeper. Like the hills is closer to the clouds and the waters sunk closer to hell.

Maybe thats where all the wets run off. Maybe the boys are right and thats where I belong too.

July 15

Samson asked me for my face to put in his book. Here I was thinking that book was for his birds and bees but Samson says I also part of the nature. He is always trying to splain me the difrence tween a naturalist and other sience men, but his words dont make too much sense. Samson seems to know every thing about every thing, and I sure dont know nuthing like him. Cept maybe topping trees.

So then I think to tell him about topping trees. This is what I do, I says. I tie round a rope and hitch myself up whole wide trunks. I hack way limbs with my axe as I go and I thunk the bark with my hammer end to make sure

I aint hitch in no hollow spots. Samson smiles and say he already know all this. But I tell him he dont know about the tree tops. And he dont know about the hills or the river or the cloud air when you reach the sky.

Never thought I could hold a fellow's attention like I did his. Samson had to stop his drawing to listen to all I had to say. So I told him how mighty it is to be holed up there with just God and your tools. How when the trees aint rusting the whole valley spreads like a green fingerprint, soft lines so far away they hardly lines at all. They softer than his hands I say to him. Where my hands could give tree bark a run for rough feeling, his hands are like touching that there view.

I never took Samson for a shy man, but he was a quiet thinker. He did think a while after that.

July 16

Dozen or so of the water hogs called for mutiny today. They says they fed up with the work. When the rivers too low for them blokes to careen our logs then things get mighty dangerous. Slipping in the muds becomes the leest of their worries when a five ton oak might come slipping after them.

Bug-eyed fellow by the name of Loyd was leading half the crew up the hillside to center camp near crack of dawn. He tells the foreman this lands been had and that they reason the whole logging crew feels the same. Nick says if they want to skip off then they welcome, but they forfeit the pay promised at the end of this season.

We been at this for months so I dowed even the riskiest jack would toss all that aside for greener pastures. Serves me right. They did exactly what they says they would do and started on the long road south. I spect its two days to the pulp mill and least a week to the nearest town by foot. Sure as sap dont know what they hoping to find after that. Maybe them fellows looking for their voice just like me.

July 19

Cut myself shaving this morning. Been too long since the last time, I spose. Huck gave me a funny look, like he dont recognize my face without

the thicket, but he dont say nuthing. No one really says much these days. Mouths as dry as the river.

July 22

I was by the fire lone with Samson and we was talking. The embers were close to dying is how late it was.

Finally he says to me, "Charlie, there are forests every where. Why aint you jumping ship like half the crew to find some thing better?"

I aint sure what I said but I asked him the same. Samson tells me he picked this river valley because of the drought.

"I aint just here studying the critters and the trees, I am studying the clymit and the wether round Potter county."

I wanted to ask what he meant. What it all meant. But I didnt ask nuthing. If I did he would surly tell me to slow down and sound it out or some thing. As if sounding it out were always the answer.

We talked a lot of things while the fire cooled. His elder brothers, my late mama, the owls hooing in the trees. He asked me more about the views way up high so I told him. And we shared a good kind of sad.

When Samson asked me to hold him I did. And after a long while when that werent enough, I showed him I was for him in other ways as well.

July 25

Foreman gathered those of us still round this morn. Told us with the river damn near dryed up there aint no way for us to move logs even if some of us choppers took up cant dogging. Says it was about time we closed shop.

No fellows were happy but few so mad as Huck. I spose an ole rot like him dont have too many seasons left. Nick says the crews got two days to break camp. I aint a wistful man but I know a look of loss when I see it, and Samson wore his wonder with no nuthing to say. Maybe I ask him what his Filadelfia would do with a woodhick like me.

July 26

I can hardly find it in my hands to write.

We was roused from the bunkhouse by a cry and Elijah came through sputtering. Not sure which order things happened, but I found myself by the tree line and my Samson laying lower to the ground than was natural. He was wearing my culk boots and a rope round his waist like he was playing pretend. But he werent pretending the way he dont breath.

The men told me he must have fell. They told me he must have tried tree topping. "Prove himself like us," Huck says. And Nick might have even laughed.

I dont want the men touching him at first but they tells me they cant leave him rotting. They say rotting. As if my Samson could rot. I aint sure these tears of mine know how to stop. How is there any goddamn water left after all this?

July 27

Elijah promises they gonna give Samson a woodhick's funeral. Horse shit. He deservs better than be wrapped in bark and buried. Better than his shoes hung to some tree branch.

I aint never seen a person die without no blood before. Even ole mama had a show of it when the fever took her, spitting up crimson and such. And every time I look at the trees I still see yesterday. Like Huck's pink elephants. I still cant think of the damn word. I can fucking think of any God damn words...

July 28

The men have gone. The camp was left to ruin and half the woods stand. Ole Huck tried his best to saddle me up, but he dont know there aint no where for me cept this river valley now.

August ...

I see the stumps, hills and hills of them over this no-more forest, cept they aint stumps no more. They grave stones like in the semetery where I buried my mama. They grave stones but without their names or their words.

I climbed up and down Samson's tree near hundred times now. White pine not much difrent than any others in these hills. At first I wanted to chop it down, but I cant bring myself to do it. The ole tree was the last to feel his soft touching hands. When I try to sleep in whats left of the bunkhouse I roll round and wonder what Samson was looking for up there. He werent up there for the wood since he dont bring an axe. Likely thinking he wont need it if he aint cutting. But its the axe hammering for hollows that keeps a woodhick safe. And its lies that keep stupid folks safe.

I tend to the trees when I can. They dying in this forever drought but seems to me it gives my crying some purpose. Watering with the little I got to give.

The river aint much more than a creek now. Not sure how long I can live off the land if it dries for good.

My ole Samson, I think I finally did find a voice in my writings and your book. It seems only fitting that there be no one left to listen.

I spend so much of my time beneath your tree. Maybe you was up there to see the valley like the birds and I do. Maybe you was up there and found heaven instead. Wherever you and the water are now, I imagine you must be taller than any tree I can dream of.

What Keeps Me From Myself

BY BENJAMIN MURRAY

is that every late afternoon
the world yawns
what's left of the sun
into my backyard
and paints the speckled chickens
orange
their feathered
feet tamp down the blades
of grass
scratching at patches
of dirt
where I place
the watermelon rind
and before I kneel
into the soil
those two hens
emerge from the rose bush
powdered with dust
fresh from their bath

EMILY RANKIN



Thyroid Insinuations & The Sandhill Cranes

BY C.M. CLARK

It was before she saw the dunes and the paved roadways,
the symphony of zippers that give way, electrifying
twin concrete lanes cracked
in the corners, sugared with sand, and as sure

as magnetic poles rule the longitude line from Greenwich
mean to a gated mews facing 60 West,
the silvered teeth snap shut, clacking their reluctant closure,
now a soldered wound overheated and healed, but only

for now.

Such simpering, the bored diagnosis. Adamant to trust
those calculations of enzyme and excess, triglyceride
pressure quotients, the drip
drip

drip of aortal determination. Better try
elsewhere with your stents, the
calipers and speculums always colder
than promised. It's

just a small gland, like others
pocketing their endocrine rhythms in secret
adherence to a lodestar, a set of mirrored instructions
as yet

unencrypted.

She remembers the katydid calls
and who can resist? A voice
that falls
into the soprano's cleaved register. But

along the curve
as the road curls west and away
from the known cleared lots, also in their time
silenced by concrete's slump and pour,

never wasting one peck
or one misplaced feather, their slender necks —
uninterrupted — lean like sand dune grasses, waiting
without hope.

Just a seamless blur
in their massed grouping,
the collective stubbornness imitating
what passes in some circles

for hunger.

Four O'Clock in Old Bartow

BY C.M. CLARK

Solid, deep blue and eager for her brokenness,
Mary Orsini wrote more checks than receipts
by the time the moon bit down. More
absence notes than permission slips. More
consonants than vowels. Her pen
itched.

I suppose I should mention
the solar eclipse, she thought.
That
at least would ground the day
and link the slice of moon

over sun to one given year
and point as surely to the candle's color,
its lavender trajectory. The ounce
or two of Chardonnay left lukewarm
in someone's cup. The night falsified

its hour clocked equally by town crier
or blind owl seeing
only the dregs
of jasmine, this premature
and fraudulent dark. It seems the change

started earlier elsewhere. Eyes protected we
can only hope to chamois the humid skies
of moisture, insistent reminders of a season
that just
won't

surrender.

There.

It's come on us early,
this extraordinary afternoon's elongations,
sidewalk shadows aping encephalitic skulls,
like alien fingers
of one hand, arthritic and

clapping.

I

will bring the other hand forward
to reach an amalgam of pixels
so familiar, so cousin-like. So soon
we will meet
at the already groaning board.

What

she asks, can I bring to this already laden supper,
what will hosts offer up only
when all blinds are drawn,
the tilted lattice slats
shut. The recalcitrant young

walk the neighborhood,
their hair unfalteringly
long, predictably
brown. She was
tired of the trees' flowers,

the flowering.

As daylight

time returned to these dull latitudes,
the breath hush settled. No glory or lull
this afternoon, late sun gone early
behind western cloud hills and
appetite lost

for movement. Things
and cells settle alike,
shouldering for their share of space
and pre-occupied air. The light escapes
with the fumes of drying paint.

It is Salome's dance, this exhale
of a quenched candle. Once a head on a plate
noticed only in its absence, neither
missing
nor mourning

the spent hot wax.

The Cows Don't Care

BY C.M. CLARK

Now there are tadpoles and lily pads
floating, things surrounding
giving way to things
that precipitate and surface.

Mine weren't the arms
to cozy the new skin, hug hard
the bit-lip uncertainty
the hair-strand wonder.

Even

at a celebration, it was another's high laugh
juddering the imminent thunder, a sequined dress
spangles on water, short to the knees, the soft acquiescence
of bare legs and cocktail heels.

These

these were your bridesmaids, your consolation prize.
This so sketched and scheduled when
mine were not the hands
to hand you over.

Mine

sat in my lap, thunderstruck and hundreds of miles between towers, another April morning outside Lake Wales watching a cow chew, just twiddling a practiced pair of useless and prehensile thumbs.

We

tiptoe around the sullen elegance like an itinerant mollusk adding micrometer after micrometer of nacre to a sand grain, cushioning the irritant -- an unintended, unvarnished

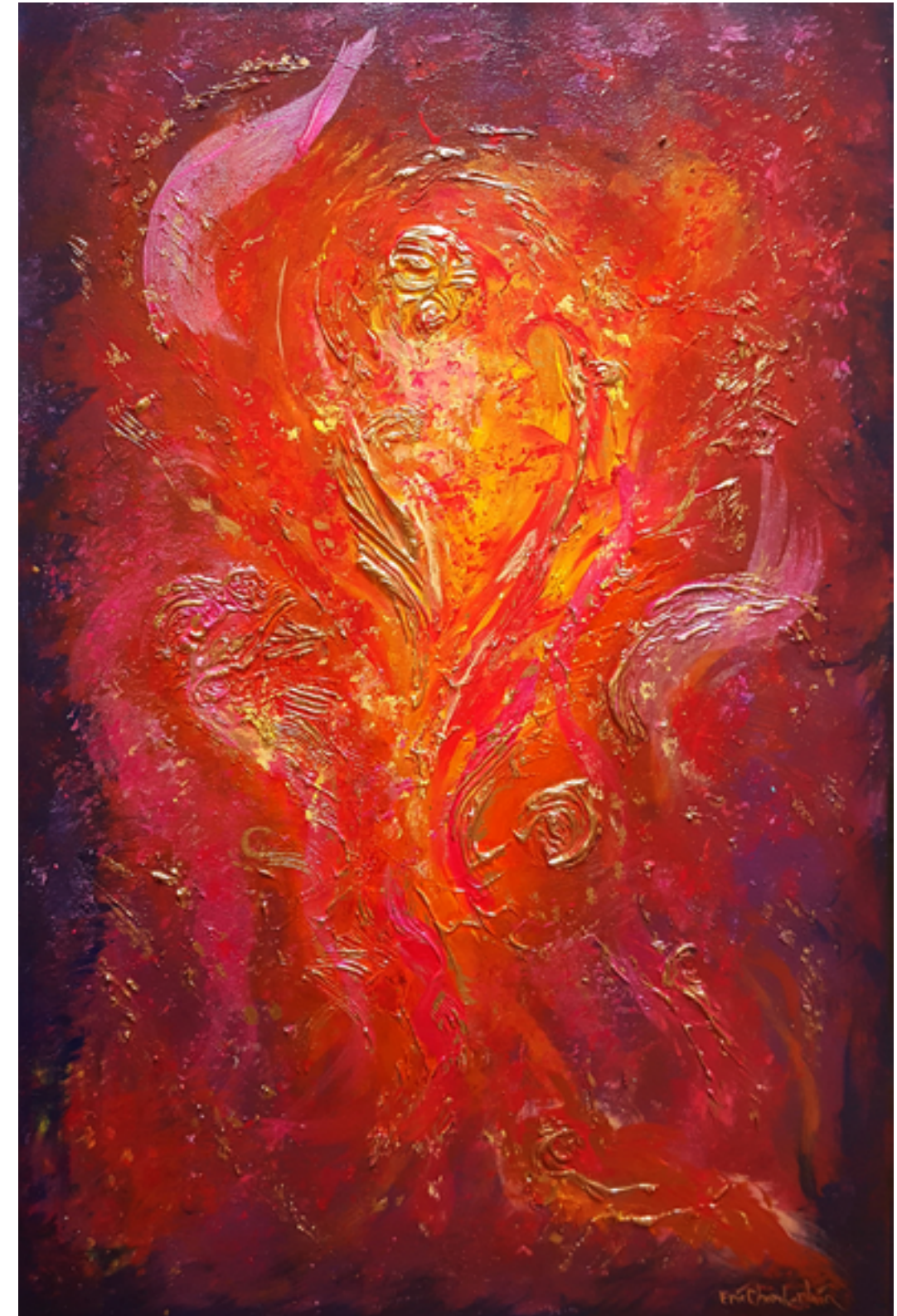
sore.

The cat mother's tongue smoothing aligning the spacious valley between eyes between this and that, that virgin world

and

this on another hand, the one that rocked the cradle, where sleeps the kingdom of infant and innocence defined, its drain field disintegrating without

ceremony.



ERIC CHAMBERLAIN

A Palisade Not Made of Gargoyles

BY MARCO ETHERIDGE

A field overgrown with wildflowers shimmering in morning sun, and above the flowers bees and beyond a dusky line of trees that mark the back boundary of the forty acres. At the near end of the field two well-tended rows of beehives form the main street of a miniature village on the borders of the flower forest. The field gives way to an earthen lot and the earthen lot to a sagging barn. Plank walls, once red, are sun-faded to oxblood. A shake roof protrudes like a tongue from the south wall, open-sided, supported by rough poles, and in the shade beneath is the tall figure of a man.

Thomas Beauregard Davis stands at a long work bench, a razor-keen gouge in his right hand, the tool poised above a rough shape nested in a bed of curled wood shavings. He turns his eyes from the sun-bright field, looks to the east, sees the old farmhouse, empty windows staring blind. Past the house, a sagging wooden fence sheds grey flakes of paint which fall into the tall grass along a gravel road.

A skeleton forest fills the space between the house and the fence, ghost trees devoid of branches. Dozens of wooden poles are planted in the Missouri earth, rooted by long labor with a set of posthole diggers. Each pole is taller than a man and perched atop each is a looming figure. The carved figures leer over the fence, many pairs of dead eyes watching the road.

Thomas stares at the skeletal palisade he has created. Or was he compelled to create this thing? His mind wrestles the two opposing thoughts while his eyes search the familiar array. Something is out of order, the ranks disturbed. His memory tells him the carved figures have exchanged perches,

moving from pole-top to pole-top, but his eyes say this cannot be.

What is he doing, Azzie? He is supposed to be working, not gawking like a statue. Yes, Azzie, tell us, tell us what the human is doing. What is it that fills his dreams, what he is bringing forth? Who will the new one be?

Hush, and the rest of you hush as well. Stop your yammering. I am trying to concentrate. The human's dreams are only open to us while we are the source of the dream. Once he has brought you forth, the substance of the dream has been shaped. The dream is then closed; you know this.

Yes Azzie, but you are the eldest, the firstborn. You can see where we cannot.

Only sometimes, only when his mind is open to me, and never when you bleat like sheep. Be quiet!

The hand holding the carving tool twitches, as if eager to resume the work. Thomas blinks, shakes his head, lowers his eyes to the work bench. He lays the gouge to the long block of wood with swift sure strokes. Shavings roll up and over his knuckles.

The wooden block is made of cypress planks laid up, glued, clamped, then planed true. It is longer than a tall man's arm, each side squared to the twelfth inch. The gouge slides along the grain with a quiet shirring sound and the shavings roll and fall.

A rough shape is emerging from the depths of the wooden block. It is the life-sized head of a raven, but with features twisted and distorted. The beak is thick and elongated, the huge eyes staring wide. Each stroke of the gouge frees more of the bird's form from the confines of its wooden prison.

His hands and eyes do the work while his thoughts wander. How many of these misshapen creatures has he carved? Too many, more than he can remember unless he stands among them. Sometimes he does that, walking along the palisade in the evening light. Then he remembers. Each carving coupled with a stream of dark dreams, nightmares that only ceased when the last wood shaving fell.

Once the newcomer is mounted on its perch facing the road, Thomas will

have a month of peace, two, sometimes three. But then another phantom pushes into his dreams, demanding to be made manifest. How long now? He had to search for the answer: Seven years last April. Seven years since his parents had been taken and the dreams began.

There was grumbling in the way of all small farming towns. The gossips whispered that Thomas was strange, had always been strange they said. An only child on a farm. What was wrong with that Davis woman? Then that horrible accident and the Davis boy left all alone just like that. Except he wasn't a boy, he was twenty-three, an adult, and all the papers were legal.

The old ladies remembered him as a strange boy grown to a man. The neighboring farmers grumbled about a perfectly good field let go to weeds and wildflowers. They grumbled even as they shoved money into the slot of the honor box out in front of that empty house and helped themselves to a jar of the best honey in the county.

The sun falls towards the dusky line of trees, quartering the evening sky. Thomas squats, driving the handles of the digger deep. He pries the handles apart, hooks that last stubborn rock and lifts the damn thing clear of the hole. He stabs the diggers into a loose pile of dirt and wipes a sleeve across his forehead. Setting the pole can wait until morning.

Thomas walks to the fence, looks up and down the empty road. Insects buzz through the slanting light and swallows hunt them in darts and dives. A toad hops out of the ditch grass on the far side of the fence and lands in a patch of dusty ground. Thomas sees the fat creature and beside the creature the tracks of a bicycle imprinted in the dust.

The bicycle tracks lead up to the fence, then disappear in a muddle of footprints. Another set of narrow tire tracks leads back into the ditch grass. Thomas looks back to the west, shading his eyes against the sun falling behind the farmhouse. The poles cast long shadows that stretch to the road and the carved figures atop are silhouetted against the evening sky. It is then that his eyes see what his memory already knows. Two of his gargoyles have moved.

The morning sun is hot on his back as he tamps the last of the crushed rock into the annulus between earth and pole. Sweat runs between his shoulder blades and stains the worn denim of his shirt. He gives the gravel one last stamp with his boot, checks the new pole for plumb. In the stillness that follows Thomas hears a squeaking noise.

He turns his eyes to the road and sees a bicycle rolling down the gravel road, chased by a small cloud of dust that swirls in the morning sun. The rider swerves the bicycle off the road and onto the drive that crosses the ditch, rattling to a halt outside Thomas' fence.

Then there is a kid standing at the fence, skinny as the pole Thomas has just planted. Fifteen, maybe sixteen, red hair sticking out every which way from under a billed cap that shades his freckled face, grinning like something is tickling him no end.

"Morning. Are you putting up a new one?"

Thomas searches for the voice you are supposed to use with visitors, a rusty voice that he has mostly forgotten. He is not smiling.

"Uh, yeah, putting up a new pole."

"Cool, I like seeing the new ones go up, another crazy critter. What do you call them?"

What did he call the things? Did they have a name?

"Gargoyles I guess is what they are. Yeah, gargoyles. You always ask so many questions?"

"Sure, all the time; drives my dad nuts. He says he's not an encyclopedia, says I should go look it up in a book. I'm Waylon, Waylon Travers. We're about four parcels up the road from you, so I guess we're neighbors. You're Mister Davis, right?"

The stream of words washes over Thomas: Neighbors, dad, Mister Davis. He struggles to take it all in.

"Thomas, just Thomas; not Mister Davis."

"Okay, only don't tell my dad because I'm supposed to call adults mister or missus. He'd have a fit if he knew. So, these are gargoyles, like on the cathedrals in Europe? Only I don't know if we can call them that without a cathedral to hang them on."

Thomas shakes his head, tries to find a single thread in this confusion of words. His eyes see the bike leaning against the fence, the same spot he saw the tracks last night. It's too many bicycles and too many words and he can't take it all in. And here's this kid just standing there, grinning and saying words like we as natural as sunrise except there is no we, so why is he saying it? Why couldn't people just speak plainly?

"I don't have a cathedral and I don't have another name for these things, so that's that. This isn't the first time you've been 'round my place, is it?"

The kid ducks his head, but only for a second, like he's not surprised at getting caught out.

"Naw, I've been by a few times. Like I was saying, I think they're cool, your gargoyles or whatever they are."

What the hell do you say to a kid that just smiles and talks? Are there rules for this, some of those magic words that no one ever explained to him? Why were folks always talking in riddles, or laughing at things that weren't funny?

"Okay, Waylon Travers, have you been moving my gargoyles around?"

There's the kid's head ducking again, but it comes right back up and he's still grinning.

"Yeah, I did. I switched the two of them, the snarly dog and that crazy monkey. I thought the dog looked better on this side. I shinnied up the pole to see how they were attached. I was worried that I couldn't move them, but you've got them set on wooden dowels. It was easy once I figured it out."

"What if I caught you? What if I saw you up one of those poles and shot you?"

"You were out back tending to your beehives. And you don't look like the kind of person who shoots kids off of poles. Do you even own a gun?"

Another question and the rules said you have to answer a question. Thomas remembers that. But maybe if he asks a question of his own, the right kind of question, this kid will go away and leave him in peace.

"No, I don't have a gun. So, umm, Waylon, you must have friends around here, right? Kids your own age?"

"Naw, not really. My best friend, Luna, she got into some big trouble and her dad has her on house arrest for the rest of the summer. I don't really get along so well with the other kids, you know? Hey, maybe I could help out around here, like with the bees or something?"

Best friend, house arrest, other kids; the words drove into his brain like a wedge.

"Look, Waylon, I don't need any help around here, or visitors. I'm not so good with, uh, with other people."

The kid nods his head like he understands, but his words are all wrong.

"Sure, I get that Thomas. I'm going to the library in town. Maybe they have a book on cathedrals and stuff like that. I'll stop back by tomorrow if I find out anything cool. See you tomorrow."

Before Thomas can say anything, the kid swings onto the bike and is pedaling away, waving one hand over his shoulder. Thomas is surprised to see his own hand waving in return.

The field is washed to silver by the waxing moon, and the wildflowers all painted with the same glow. The night is still in the deep hours after midnight. The bees are still as well, the sleeping bees and the dead bees.

Thomas stands at the edge of the silver glow, the moonlit border between field and hives. His hands clutch a long block of wood and at his feet two beehives smashed to splinters. Shreds of honeycomb drop from the wooden club and with them the bodies of bees smashed to pulp. His breath comes in gasps, chest heaving. He stares at the club, the flattened hives, the silver light, remembering nothing.

No, not nothing, something; more than something. A black bird with a huge obsidian beak, a beak meant for rending and tearing, and above it saucer eyes that glowed red. The thing flew at him from out of the darkness, blacker than the night surrounding it. The beak snapped and the eyes burned and glowed and he ran from it, ran into the darkness, blind and stumbling. He fell to his knees, rose again, and ran. Then he was trapped and fighting, the hell-bird flapping around his head and screeching. A club appeared in his hands and he lashed out at those glowing eyes, swinging

the heavy wood through the air. The club found the bird's head, smashing the evil thing to the ground at his feet. With a frenzy of blows, he beat the nightmare raven to broken bone and feathers.

That was amazing, Azzie! We didn't need your help to see that one. The dream drove him right out into the night, right out where he belongs. Too bad he did not smash every one of those stupid bee houses. The insects distract him from his work. What will happen now, Azzie? Tell us, tell us what the human is doing.

You see as well as I do, for what he does he does outside the dream. The dream pursued the human into our world. That is very powerful, very special.

Will he work faster now, Azzie? He wastes time with those bees, so much time, it makes me angry. Yes, and do not forget about the boy, that ugly, ugly boy. Azzie, where did the boy come from? What is he doing here?

Hush and watch, you must learn patience. Did I not just say that this dream was powerful and special? Do you never listen to me? Now pay attention and watch.

And they are silent, and they watch, and the dark poles cast thin shadows in the pale moonlight.

A hot morning sun beats against the back of his work shirt as he picks up the last splintered bits of wood. Thomas doesn't hear the squeaking of the bike, or the bang of the bike against the fence, but he does hear the kid's shouts.

"Thomas, hey Thomas, are you here?"

The kid comes around the corner of the house. Bees zip through the air around Thomas' head, crawl on the mesh of the veil, on his gloves. They are angry; no telling what they might do to a stranger. Thomas walks away from the now irregular line of beehives, waving at the Travers kid to wait. He raises the beekeeper's hat and waves again until he sees the kid stop. Thomas shakes the last of the straggler bees from his gloves, watches them careen back into the cloud of confusion buzzing over the hives. He walks

toward Waylon, who is busy grinning like that's the only face he owns.

"Good morning, Thomas. Wow, what happened to your beehives?"

"Hello, Waylon. I'm not sure what happened. Maybe a fox got after them, or a raccoon."

Waylon cocks his head, looking past Thomas' shoulder.

"I don't think so. A fox or a raccoon, they might tip a beehive over maybe, but not flatten one. Hey, maybe it was a bear. I saw a black bear once down past our woods, only my dad said I didn't, but I know I did. Hey, we should look for tracks."

There it is again, the kid saying we. Next thing you know this Waylon boy will be living in the barn. Or better yet, let him have the house. Thomas could sleep in the barn.

"The bees are pretty agitated right now. We probably ought to leave them alone. So, uh, what brings you by?"

Thomas remembers those words coming out of his mother's mouth, a thing that sounds one way but means something else.

"Oh yeah, I wanted to tell you about the stuff I found out down to the library."

Thomas motions towards the cool side of the barn.

"Tell me in the shade, then. I need to stow this gear."

He starts walking towards the barn and the kid is right there, talking a mile-a-minute.

"You won't believe it, but I found a book at the library. It was all about mediaeval legends and stuff like that. I bet no one in that library has ever read it but me. Or maybe me and Luna, because she reads everything. Anyway, I found out what gargoyles really are, which is not what we have, so we're going to have to think up a new name."

Thomas lays the hood and gloves on a bench and sits down on the hunk of stump he uses as a chopping block. The stream of words is making him tired; there seems to be no stopping it.

"You're saying gargoyles is the wrong word?"

Which sets the kid to nodding and grinning and talking all at the same time.

“Right, because gargoyles are the ends of the gutters on cathedrals, not carvings on poles. The original gargoyle was in old France, a scary dragon with wings and fiery breath. This guy named Saint Romanus goes to fight it with only one helper, a brave prisoner from the dungeon. The saint kills the dragon and they drag it back to the town. The people throw the body on a bonfire, but the head and neck won’t catch fire because hey, it’s a fire-breathing dragon, right? Romanus tells the villagers that the gargoyle will ward off evil spirits, so they mount the unburned head on the steeple of the church. The legend spreads and that’s why they put gargoyles on the roofs of the cathedrals.”

They sit in the shade of the barn and Thomas listens to the flow of the boy’s talk. Then Waylon is saying goodbye and Thomas watches his skinny back disappear around the side of the house. He thinks he can hear the squeak of the bicycle but maybe his brain is just filling in the sound. Waylon rolls past the far side of the house, just his upper body visible as he floats along the road. The bicycle is screened by the tall ditch grass and so is the small cloud of dust that chases the boy down the road.

Thomas rises from his stump and walks to the burn pile. The sticky remnants of the smashed beehives are piled in the center of the blackened ring. Thomas reaches for a dirty plastic jug, unscrews the cap, pours waste oil over the whole mess. He reaches for a box of matches, pauses, then walks away.

When he returns from the barn, he is carrying the cypress block. He tosses the block on the pile and douses it with oil. The dirty black liquid runs over the partially carved beak, pools in the saucer eyes. The match flares and the flickering flame finds the trash beneath the wood. Cardboard curls, paper smokes, and tongues of fire leap up to find the rivulets of oil. Flames leap high and a pall of black smoke rises from the pyre.

It takes Thomas three hours to clean out the old tack room in the barn. The afternoon heat is coaxing old smells from the barn boards but he doesn’t stop working. By suppertime he has everything moved into the barn. The single window of the tack room is open and the old curtain flutters over

the head of his bed, just like it did in the bedroom. The chest of drawers fits against the far wall. Familiar pictures hang from nails driven into the timbers by his grandfather.

He cooks his supper in the house but brings it out to the barn to eat. They can have the house if they want it that bad. He’s fine with the barn. He fills a pipe and smokes, watches the sun fall to the tree line beyond the field of wildflowers. Crickets begin their evening song and small frogs join in from the hidden ditch along the road.

It’s full dark when Thomas goes to his bed. Mice skitter along the wall of the new bedroom and he is glad for their company. The mice can stay. The others, the dark ones, let them look for him in the house. It’s as much of a bedtime prayer as he can manage. Maybe they will leave him in peace. And for this night at least, it seems that they do.

Thomas rises with the sun of a new day. He drinks coffee and makes breakfast from the leftovers of last night. He walks back to the barn, leaving the house open and empty. Honey has to be extracted from the hives before the bees return from their morning flights. He throws down the last of his coffee and slips the veiled hood over his head.

By midmorning, the sun has found the roof of the shop and the day is turning sultry. Thomas stands at the wood rack, running his hand over the cypress blocks, his fingers feeling the grain, deciding. He chooses two blocks, carries one to the work bench, returns for the second. He sets brass dogs into receiving holes, tightens clamps, and the blocks are locked to the bench, the bench to the earth.

He works the rest of the morning away, carves through the afternoon. The big gouge clears away the bulk, then the smaller gouge cutting for shape. His hands move back and forth to the tool rack, lift a vee-gouge, an angle cutter. His hands only stop carving when he pauses to hone an edge.

Thomas hears the snick of a razor-sharp edge slicing with the grain, the soft whisper as a shaving falls, and the leather creak of his boots when he shifts his weight. Now and then a pickup passes down the road raising a cloud of dust and the steady crunch of gravel under heavy tires.

The afternoon passes as figures take shape in the wooden blocks. He

does not hear the sound he is expecting, the sound he realizes he is waiting for. No bicycle makes its squeaky way down the lonely gravel road.

The tree line is dark, the bees back in their hives by the time Thomas fills his evening pipe. His fingers ache as he tamps the moist tobacco into the burl bowl. The evening serenade is in full swing and from the pond he can hear the contrabass of the bullfrogs.

A night breeze flutters the curtain over his bed and the mice scratch out a lullaby on the plank floor. Thomas drifts towards sleep with the same thought held fast: Leave me in peace, for just this night, leave me in peace. But this night, his prayer will not be heard.

He claws from sleep like a drowning man breaks the surface of the night sea, arms flailing in the darkness. His fingers find the overhead light cord and pull. The makeshift bedroom flares with light. Thomas throws his arms up to fend off the daemon of his dream. He searches the room with panicked eyes but there is no sign of the thing, no trace of the black raven wrapped in smoke and flame. The eyes are the last to fade, saucer-wide and glowing with fire. Then there is only the plain wooden room, the stillness of the dark night outside the window, and his heart beating like a drum.

A soft breath of night trickles through the open window, chilling the sweat on his back. Thomas blinks, tries to bring the room into focus. He drops his arms to the mattress and swings his legs over the edge. The plank floor is rough against the soles of his feet. The bare light bulb sways above him and his shadow sways with it. He sits under the swinging lamp and feels the anger rising to his throat. His shout breaks the silence.

“No, no, No! I won’t do it!”

Thomas rises from the bed. He pulls on yesterday’s work clothes and laces up his boots. The plank floor creaks under his feet as he steps into the night.

The moon is only a few days from full and the barnyard glows silver. Thomas walks out of the moonglow and into the blackness beneath the sloped shop roof. He finds a lantern by feel, pumps the plunger, listens for the hiss of fuel, strikes a match. The mantle flames, glows bright, the shadows flicker and draw back. He pumps the lantern again and white light

spills out with a hiss.

Thomas hangs the lantern on a hook above the workbench. The light spills down over two carved figures, a man and women holding hands. The carvings lie atop the remains of the cypress blocks as if on a twin bier. Thomas runs his fingertips over the contours of the carved wood, deciding. He reaches an aching hand to the tool rack, selects a fishtail gouge. The wide blade slides over the work, raising shavings so thin they are translucent in the glow of the lantern.

I don’t like this, Azzie. I don’t like what the human is doing. This is not right. Azzie, I’m frightened. Why doesn’t he answer? One of you wake him up, this is no time to be sleeping. Why don’t you listen to me? Wake him up, I said, wake Azzie up. Why aren’t you seeing this? Look, look at what the human is doing. This is not what is supposed to happen. Why don’t you open your eyes? Open your eyes, all of you, wake yourselves, and wake Azzie. We need him. I need him. This is not right. I’m frightened, why don’t you hear me? Why don’t you answer? Where have you gone? Why am I all alone?

Thomas sits in the sun, lets it bake into him like a lizard on a rock. His index finger wants to cramp as he tamps tobacco into his pipe. The safety match flares, flames, and he cups it over the bowl. The smoke rises, drifts away in tendrils. His coffee has gone lukewarm, but he sips from the mug, glad for the strong taste of it. He sends another cloud of smoke into the morning air, watches it float toward the bees buzzing above the hives.

He hears the squeaking of the bicycle before he sees the boy. Thomas turns his head, sees Waylon waving, watches him disappear on the far side of the farmhouse. The boy reappears on the near side of the house, walking alongside the rattily bike. He leans it against the woodpile and Thomas sees that same wide grin plastered on his face.

“Morning, Thomas.”

“Hey, Waylon, have a seat.”

Thomas waves his pipe towards an empty kitchen chair. The kid is

beaming like it's Christmas.

"Really?"

"Sure, take a load off. You must be hot from the bike ride."

The kid perches on the chair, looks around the farmyard, looks at Thomas smoking his pipe.

"Are you taking a day off?"

"Yeah, I guess so. I didn't sleep so well last night."

Waylon nodded his head.

"Did you have a bad dream? I have bad dreams sometimes, really scary ones, mostly about being lost. Which is funny, because I never get lost. My dad says I have an internal compass. But I when I get lost in my dreams it's the scariest thing I know. It doesn't make any sense, but I guess dreams don't have to make sense."

"No, I guess not. Since I couldn't sleep, I worked instead. Got the new carving almost done. You can take a peek if you like."

The kid shoots off his chair like he's scalded. Thomas points to the shop with the stem of his pipe and the kid scampers off like a squirrel. He's at the bench in a shot and Thomas watches him bend over the carvings, moving his head around like a robin hunting a worm. The kid walks back to the rickety chair, turns a serious face to Thomas.

"Wow, Thomas, this one is really different, in a good way I mean. It's not scary like the other carvings. Hey look, they have farm clothes just like folks from round here. They remind me of those old-time photos, like somebody's parents maybe. I really like it."

Thomas rolls the boy's words in his head. He looks down at the carved figures. Yes, exactly like someone's parents. He wishes he could hear their voices: his mother's soft and kind, his father's deep and slow. Even if they cannot speak, their memory has chased the dark voices away. He knows now how to keep them away, how to keep them silent. If they try to come back, he will carve them away.

The kid's voice cuts across his thoughts.

"Sorry, Waylon, what did you say?"

"I said, when is it going to be finished?"

"There's a bit of finish work yet, smoothing out this and that, but I should start painting it tomorrow."

Waylon nods his head and the grin comes back.

"I'd like to see that, the painting I mean, if that wouldn't be a bother. I promise to stay out of the way and all."

Thomas nods his head, sets the cold pipe down beside the empty coffee mug.

"Sure, Waylon, that would be fine."

"Really? You mean it? I don't have chores tomorrow so I could come down after breakfast."

"Fair enough, you do that. I promise to hold off on the painting work until you get here."

The kid pops off his chair like a jack-in-the-box, plops back down without his grin.

"That's great, but speaking of chores, I sort of snuck off this morning. If my dad finds out, he's going to skin me."

Thomas smiles and waves a hand towards the road.

"We can't have you getting skinned. Go on, get going. The paint work will keep until tomorrow."

The kid is out of his chair again and the grin is back.

"See you tomorrow, Thomas."

"Sure, I'll see you tomorrow, Waylon."



VAN LANIGH

An Ode to Your Five Couches

BY MOLLIE FOX

Why the fuck do you have five couches?
There's one of you.
You don't need five couches,
You just can't decide what you want to do with four of them.
But you can't decide what you want to do with anything, can you?

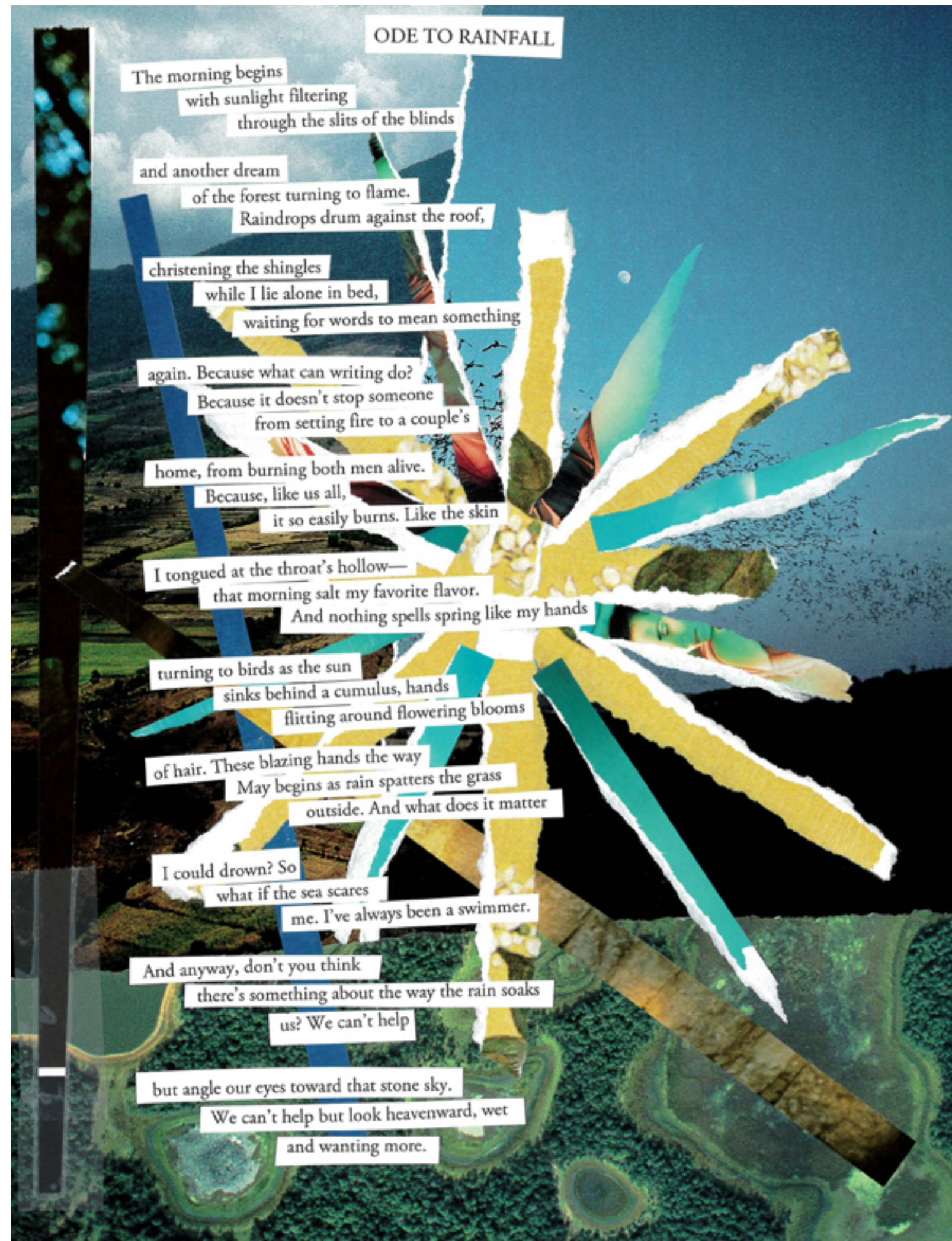
In this story, you are the directionless hero, stuck at a crossroad between
This and That.
Here and There.
You and I.
Not that this is about us, of course.
There is no room for us in your story, filled as it is with furniture.

No, this is about you and your many couches,
your many feelings, your many crossed roads.
"You never know," you said, the door left ajar,
eyes lingering on your latest conundrum.
I was a direction.
And you looked at me like I was a sixth couch.

Spring

BY DESPY BOUTRIS

When February finally gives way to March, I feel every door in the house fall from its jamb, feel the sleet soften into rain. I watch you hop out of bed to go stand by the window, looking at the rain slapping the road in the early morning light. I ghost toward you, thinking maybe we're meant to be sea creatures—the way we watch the water fall and want to taste it on our tongues. I think about the water pooling in the potholes, about how many times I've wanted to drown. And then I hear the roosters' calls, let myself inhale the lemon blossoms wafting through the cracked-open window. And then I wrap my arms around your waist, mouth the flowers sprouting on your shoulder: jasmine, hibiscus, lavender, skin petal-smooth, the rolling fields in front of us: the tractors, the trucks, the houses wilting in this wetness. Yes, I also think about the overflowing lake, all the times it asked me for a kiss. And, yes, I once wacked a wasp's nest with a bat because I couldn't bear the thought of the insects dying slow deaths, drowning during the rainy months. I learned I can't withstand their sting, swelling so bad some hiker had to take me home. But that was then. Today, I tongue the warmth of your neck and think maybe another month of wetness won't be so bad. I inhale your hair and think maybe I've finally found a suitable depth.



MONSOON IN MY THROAT

Still the scent of sleep, I walk
through the woods, swallowing wind
in mouthfuls. A mile away, my mother fries an egg,
knifes the yolk to watch it pool

on her plate. She spends days pulling weeds
from the garden, prickly daughters
she can throw away. Unlike me—
my mistakes lengthen like gossamer,
and I search for an oak in which to build
a better home. I think the newspaper's
obituary section should include the trees.

And the sound of breeze through leaves
is no aria. More mourning song.

We die in so many ways daily:
sunburned skin flaking like a pastry, nostrils
dripping blood. My mother
walks down to the store for milk,
and I recover all the names I've been given:

Milkskin, Beanpole, Blue Eyes, One for Whom I Feel
Hunger. I wish life floated on
with flawless grammar, no desire to rewrite
what could have been, no way to know
the dried-up river's no fiction.

When my grandmother died, my mother
didn't cry, and neither did I. We feel homesick
for nowhere, eyes searching latte spume
for fortunes, laughter devolving into dust
in our throats. Sometimes life is a minor key.

Sometimes it's an ocean of flames.

THINGS THAT (EASILY) BREAK

after Jamaal May

Your mother's good china.
The dozen eggs you hauled home, no mind
to the rain-soaked, oil-slicked road
or your knack for falling (on the ground
& apart). A cellphone
screen when you have a tiled bathroom,
high counters, & a kitten.
The clavicle. Rules. Especially
when they're stupid rules. Like when
you're a kid & they say

No talking! or *No running down the ramp!*
as if not flying by like a windswept
plastic bag is easy. As if you're not a bird. As if.
Sticks when you step on them. Sunglasses.

& wine glasses. Have you heard
of a party where not even a single
glass breaks?
The ice. When things are right.

Day, how it breaks open, how it shatters
the night with sunrays, splits you
from your sleep, pierces your eyes with blades
of light. A fast when there are pancakes cooking.

Garden-ripened tomatoes. Wet
paper bags. Your word. Mirrors.

Don't even get me started on headphones.
Or hearts. An umbrella, but only

when the rain pours,
only when the wind wails,

only when you need that shelter.

The Words of Your Language

BY JODIE CLARK



BJORN BENGTSSON

Billy's just announced the next topic.

"The one that got away."

I'm on my third can of Stella and I need a piss. But Andrew's already taken up the challenge and it seems rude to walk away. Besides, as soon as I leave the campfire I'll be ambushed by the swarm of midges I know is waiting in the dark, surrounding our badly protected little company.

And then there's the fire itself, which holds me in its seductive trance. It ripples the air, ripping otherworldly openings in the spaces between the dancing licks of flame.

They're portals, I think. You could travel into one of them if you didn't mind getting scorched.

I hold my Stella at arm's reach. It's been a while since I've been this buzzed.

"The one that got away," repeats Andrew.

As he plays for time, my mind fixates on the phrase itself, on its structure, its underlying grammatical patterns. It's a noun phrase, though it doesn't have any nouns in it. *The* is a determiner, *one* is a pronoun, and the rest of it is a relative clause. But how can a pronoun follow a determiner? And could you put any other determiner in front of *one*? I try it out, as Leila has taught me to do.

A one that got away.

My one that got away.

That I'll never be able to ask Leila about this hits me like a punch in the gut.

I met her just over three months ago, the 25th of March, two days after the UK lockdown. Her confinement started a week earlier.

She lives on the outskirts of Paris, in a place called Saint-Cloud.

Leila, Saint-Cloud.

Those two names kept me company during solitary meals of dwindling stores of microwaved beans in my cramped flat in Leeds. I imagined Leila and her little girl floating through quarantine on a bed of fluffy, saintly clouds.

In our first video call a couple of weeks later I learned it's pronounced San Clue.

That final syllable evoked not heavenly skies, but solvable mysteries.

I guess I should start with the mystery.

No, I'll start with the school.

Back in November, four months after graduation, I was reeling from the intense tedium of my call-centre job and despairing for my future. In an unaccustomed rush of motivation, I applied to a summer certification programme in Prague, on Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages.

An e-mail at the start of 2020 congratulated me on the success of my application. *Your passport to adventure awaits!* Three months later they closed the school.

I drank my way through a fridge pack of Carling, but still couldn't muster any grief about my cancelled adventure.

I'll go some other time, I told myself, when all this is over. I pulled out a pile of handouts from the linguistics modules I'd had to do for my English degree in preparation.

I couldn't understand any of it. I posted a drunken cry for help on a language-nerd forum. *Can anyone tell me what nominal determination is?* *#linguisticsfordummies*

The thread grew lengthy with impenetrable terminology: definites, indefinites, demonstratives, gender, number, something called a DP. A controversial sub-thread on transnumeral nominals versus mass nouns

sparked a heated debate.

By then the shame of my ignorance had compounded the shame of my cowardice, and I rushed out into the undoubtedly pestilent street, only to find the shelves at my local Sainsbury's stripped of booze.

Leila's response distinguished itself from amongst the unfathomable debates and interminable explanations. *Nominal determination is a mystery school*, she'd written. *Only initiates can know its secrets.*

"Look around the room you're in now and tell me one thing you see."

What I was seeing was her.

The crescent eyes set deep within her full moon face exuded a certain inexplicable quality, a gentle kindness drawn from a deep well of sorrow. A few wild, dark ringlets of loosed hair partially eclipsed her face.

"A window," I said.

"A window," she repeated, her American accent coming through in the o sound. She'd studied at Penn State. "Indefinite determination. If you tell someone to look at a window, any window will do. We could both look at a window right now. But we are hundreds of miles apart, so we will be looking at different windows."

"It's my front room window, actually," I said. I was playing for time, trying to hide my confusion.

"My front room window," she repeated. "Possessive determination. The window or the front room or both – they become things that belong to you."

"It's a rented flat," I said stupidly.

She smiled indulgently, the crescent of her slim lips completing the perfect half-circle of each of her eyes.

"Possessive determination does not mean you own something, but that you have a relationship with it. You have a history with your window, you could say. You look out of it every day."

"It's the window I stare out of when I should be doing something productive," I confessed.

"The window you stare out of," Leila affirmed. "A definite description,

preceded by the definite article. It transforms something generic into something specific, a unique window, special to you. Now we can know the nature of your relationship with this window. It tempts you away from your mundane world, it hints at wider horizons. Through it you dream of a life beyond your rented worries.”

It might have been what I learned later was called first-language interference – the lilting intonation, the idiosyncratic turns of phrase – but everything she said sounded like poetry to me.

“It was a window that I saw first, also,” she said, “when I discovered the mysteries of nominal determination.”

She’d not planned on returning to France after she graduated from Penn State in 2015. If she’d known she was destined to go back, she would never have married so young – twenty-two, desperate to continue the life she’d forged for herself on those new shores, her student visa on the brink of expiration. The following year her daughter was born and Trump was elected president.

Her new husband, Tim, was equally disturbed by both events.

“He was embarrassed,” she told me. “His belief in America’s greatness was shattered when the man he called ‘the idiot’ came into power. And then, Camille. He wasn’t prepared for her, either. He didn’t know what babies are like.”

He learned that new-borns cry most of the time and disrupt one’s carefully developed habits and beloved little rituals.

He decided that they needed a big shakeup. He convinced his company to transfer him to their Paris branch. His young French wife was homesick, he said.

“He told everyone I was struggling with a new baby and that I needed to be near my family.”

Her family lived 300 miles away, in rural Alsace.

“I said goodbye to the last six years of my life – to the only place I’d lived as an adult – and dragged my one-year-old to this apartment Tim found in Saint-Cloud. Paris was more foreign to me than anywhere we could have

moved in America.”

Tim spent more and more hours away from their apartment, rounding off long workdays with regular drinking binges with his ex-pat colleagues. Leila stayed at home with the baby. She knew no one in Paris, so she struggled to arrange playdates for Camille. Leila fretted over her daughter’s socialisation and development. At 18 months, she had yet to speak her first word in either French or English.

“The specialists told me that our bilingual household was the problem. Tim’s French was still only very rudimentary, so I began to speak to her only in English. When that didn’t work, I started to do my own research.”

She read every article she could find on language acquisition and quickly became fascinated by the nature of language itself. “One day I was pointing to the pictures in one of Leila’s books and saying the words again and again, hoping she’d mimic me. *Apple, apple, apple. Bear, bear, bear.* You know how if you say a word too many times, it starts to lose its meaning?”

My onscreen lips formed and re-formed the word – *apple, apple, apple* – until I’d dissolved into the rhythm of those silent syllables.

“It suddenly seemed so strange to me that there should be words for all the different things in the world.”

Her eyes grew wider as she reflected on the wonder of that moment. Her focus was fixed on some point beyond the laptop’s meagre screen. The eager face that shared that flat space with hers had faded.

When she brought her gaze back in to look at me, I re-emerged.

I watched my digital reflection redden with pleasure.

Camille spoke her first words last September, at the age of three and a half, the day after her father moved in with his new girlfriend. The mystified language therapists pronounced her level of both French and English to be as good as any child her age.

Leila didn’t hear any more news of Tim until a week after Camille’s fourth birthday.

Her mobile rang in the middle of one of our video calls. Her face turned to ash, and she ran from the room, calling out to me in French words I

didn't understand.

"Maman says she's sorry but she has to take the call," Camille said. She was sitting on the floor watching a French cartoon on an iPad. Her hands were busy forming shapes out of stray bits of wool.

I could just make out Leila's voice, quaking with urgency, in the other room.

I tried to distract Camille from whatever tragedy had just befallen us. "Erm," I said, and cleared my throat. I didn't know how to talk to a child. "What are you making?" I asked.

"A language," she said, without looking up.

"Oh," I said.

In the background I heard the rasping sound of Leila's choked sobs.

"Will you teach me the words of your language?" I asked.

Camille looked at the lone face on her mother's glowing screen with indulgence. "Languages aren't made of words, silly-boots."

"They're not?"

"*Non*," she said, with authority.

"What are they made of, then?"

"Cosy nests, warm blankets and soft cocoons." She held up an indistinct ball of multicoloured fluff. "Maman made a language for me when I was little, and now I'm making one for Daddy."

Leila came back in the room to make a frenzied, apologetic end to our call. Her English was more French-accented than I'd ever heard it. Within moments her face had faded from my screen and I watched my own tear-stained face stare back at me, repeating the two syllables of her name until they'd lost their meaning.

"Something struck me in what I was reading about nominal determination," she'd said, on the day I was initiated. "I looked up to see the light streaming through the window. *The window, my window, this window, this light*. I knew then that language does something much more mysterious than labelling things. It twists and turns, wrapping itself around the elements of our world, like a net cast into the sea. But not

quite like a net, which captures what is already there. It makes space for what is not yet there, like a cocoon, or a womb. A membrane, perhaps. It is only once the language membrane is formed that something new can come into being."

"That sounds..." I didn't know what to say. "It sounds like you're describing something supernatural."

"I guess I am," she admitted. "It's how I started thinking about language – as a form of alchemy."

"A mystery school," I said.

"Yes." Her smile wrapped round me like a cosy nest.

It was the police who'd called on the last day I spoke to Leila, to tell her that her husband had been in a car accident and was in critical condition in a Parisian hospital.

The greatest damage was to the left hemisphere of his brain. Eventually he regained all his faculties but his speech. She moved him back into their Saint-Cloud apartment and committed herself full-time to his rehabilitation.

I'm afraid we won't be able to continue our lovely conversations, she texted.

Why not??? I whined.

My sweet Jeremy, she replied.

Possessive determination, I observed. I waited a full thirty seconds before sending another message. *I belong to you*.

Oh, Jeremy. I'm a married woman.

Indefinite determination, I countered, petulant initiate that I was.

We're looking through different windows now, she replied.

A ripple of riotous laughter announces the end of Andrew's story. All eyes are now on me.

"You haven't had a go yet, Jeremy," Billy says. "What's your one that got away?"

I note the possessive determiner *your* before the pronoun *one* and my stomach freefalls. Suddenly everything's devastatingly wide open – the

incessant dance of the campfire flames, the bottomless sky, the oppressively distant light of the stars. This trip feels like an irreversible mistake, like I'm looking through the wrong window.

"I'm desperate for a piss," I say, excusing myself.

I stumble to my feet and break away from their circle, exposing my vulnerable skin to the great cloud of invisible predators that now envelopes me.

The moon is wrapped in clouds, the owls send out their soothing sounds, but the words they call are not for me. There is no language in this wide darkness to hold me, to make space for me, to bring me into being.



MONICA MG



GEORGE STEIN

Portrait of My Mother at Twenty-Three

BY TERIN WEINBERG

We are built the same—thick calves
& hands fit to grip. We are built to
stake tomatoes into the earth's chest;
crack its ribs open to fill it, to grow.

She still doesn't want kids, she always said
she was never getting married, never having kids,
but her hands know nurture already. They are
gloved and digging in the dirt, trying
to build up the garden. She's busy

on the raspberry bush now—weeding
it down. She's hoping to bake
a pie when the branches bud. I see her
eyeing the hives, asking the bees
to flavor this year's yield with berries.

She's tending to the garden now, treating
each tomato vine like the delicate fingers
of a child—gripping them 'round
the metal cages, showing them how to hold on.

Long Distance

BY SEAN CHO A.

She's visiting and expects me to
become a past self: dressed up
with short hair.
I've poured the vodka down the sink.
The rats are gleefully gnawing on each other's tails.

*

On the beach Taylor fiddles
with my leg hair.
Undershirts soaked in stomach
acid. Measuring the space
between my ribs. Forgive me, you were never meant to see me
like this. Given space water rushes away from itself. She says
this has to do with particles.

It's science! she exclaims.

First, hands tremble. Then a body drenches itself in salt water. Being
anywhere leaves me covered in want.

Taylor turns off the lights and asks me to undress her.
She turns on Chopin and expects me to be graceful.

I'm sexless as a fig.

All my desires are far from here.

*

Coffee grounds and now I can speak to her like
a prophet. Of course, you love me like this, a
cat chasing its own tail. Full of joy then pride.
Its downfall? A mouth full of sharp canines.

Now, the feline is remorseful.

To my dismay, there's a part of me that needs to plunge in murky water.
I am only a man
a God forsaken mammal.



ERIC CHAMBERLAIN

red skies at night, sailors delight; red sky at
morning, sailors take warning

BY MICHELLE CADIZ

[identity]

ships must undergo a de-naming ceremony before re-naming

true names, false names, old names--
here there is no certainty, only
ceremony to give the power of name
over body.

this act of reclamatin, rebirth, requires
the cleansing of fire. identity carved in ink
and paint, seeped black into this vessel
that carries me-- to begin again i purge
with heat, to clear away the hold of old
words, to let
the past melt
like ash on the tongue

[the offertory]

begin the fishing season by shedding blood for good luck

what we take, we give back -- an offering of red splashed on broken
knuckles, bruises blooming like tidepools under skin. the circle of life,
lifeblood for lifeblood, this violence is prayerful: with every falling fist i
am entreating, my god, my god, here is my suffering, my god, take this
blood and return it to me, make me whole again.

here my god is merciless and nonchalant and i leave offerings at her
skirts; as the son to the father, we sacrifice ourselves to the mother,
please, let these tokens of red be enough for you.

[burial]

wearing a dead man's clothes on the same voyage he died on is bad luck

the thing about the sea is that it leaves no trace: one man lighter, we sail
back with the wind and nothing remains of you but the scent on your
spare shirt, the sound your body made when it hit the water, still
ringing in my ears. and didn't they think that perhaps i want more than
that? that to have the ghost of you cling to me, to hold me when the sea
breeze turns me blue with cold, would be worth the disease, the storms,
the starvation.

but soon all i will hear is the waves against the hull, and all i will smell is
the salt, and by the time i put that shirt on, there will be nothing of you
left in it, your spirit gone on some seabird, or lost like ripples to the tide.

[in absentia]

to whisle brings storms

governance is manmade,
land-made but
what is the law of the land
without land, without man?
here there is only the sky,
the sea, this body with its bloody
thighs and heavy brests; we are
beholden only to wind and current,
fluid and irrepessible, they do not
absorb action as land does, as
man does.

here there is space
for magic: pursed lips, high
notes, every sound crackles
lightning in the distance.
without the clutch
of man, every breath comes
easy, laden with possibility.
like whistling for storms,
girls carry everyday
magics, released only
in the freedoms of water.

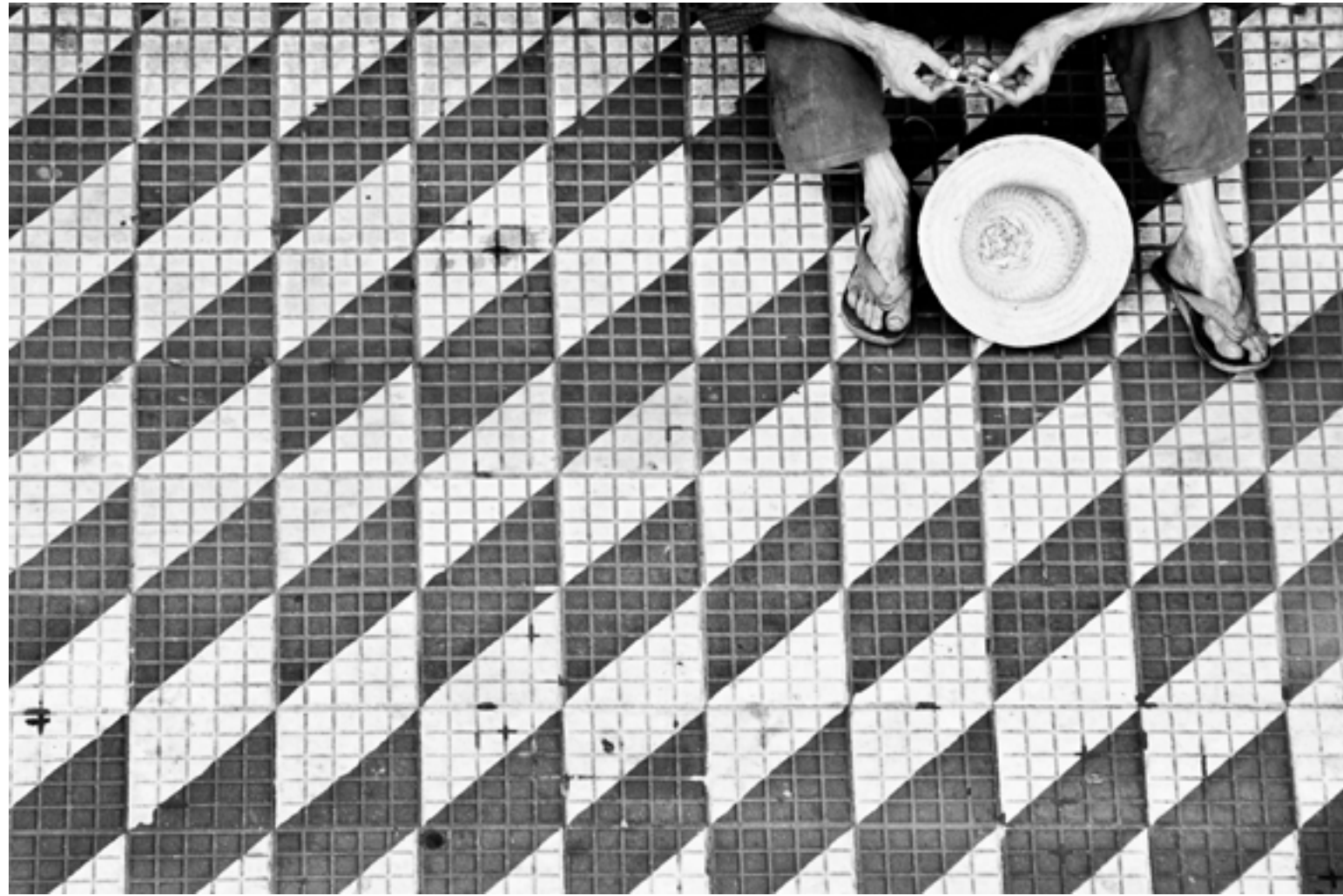
Street Photography

A Photo Essay

BY GUILHERME BERGAMINI







The Knight of Faith

Inspired by Dorte Nors's "The Buddhist"

BY JOSHUA SHAW

One week after his father-in-law's funeral the Knight of Faith finds a raccoon in the driveway. His wife is staying at her father's to get his affairs in order. He calls to tell her about the raccoon. "I don't love you anymore, Carl," she says.

The raccoon is a baby, small and sickly, with patchy fur and fattened ticks burrowed into its skin. Its eyes glaze when the Knight of Faith plumbs them with a flashlight. It wobbles on unsteady paws.

He scoops it up with a pair of plastic snow shovels, carries it into their home, and sets it down in the tub. It hisses when he showers it with warm water and tries to dry it with an old quilt.

"It looks like we have a new addition to the family," the Knight of Faith tells his wife.

"I'm not coming home, Carl," she says.

The Knight of Faith volunteers to teach The Human Condition. It meets Tuesday evenings in a doublewide trailer at the edge of campus. The classroom is cramped and harshly lit by a buzzing fluorescent light.

Usually, the Knight of Faith works in an office at the college. He asks alumni for donations. He overhears that the school needs someone to teach a half-semester course. It is only September but too many students have failed.

Some may not graduate on time. They need a last-minute class to pass.

"I can teach it," the Knight of Faith says. He studied philosophy. He is a spiritual person.

"Okay," says the provost.

On the first night, an older woman interrupts his lecture. She carries her supplies in an overstuffed Thomas the Train backpack. She has a face like an eviction notice.

"I'm sixty-two. What can you teach me about the human condition?" she says.

The Knight of Faith explains that his wife just left him. Also, he is a Buddhist. His soul is expansive. It radiates goodwill.

The raccoon scratches at the tub's sides but cannot drag itself free. It looks famished. What should the Knight of Faith feed it? Raccoons forage in dumpsters, he knows that much. He empties the kitchen trashcan into the tub: coffee grounds, rotisserie chicken, expired cottage cheese, sliced-off strawberry stems.

"*Bon appetite*," he says.

Later, he types into Google *what do raccoons eat* and finds a webpage of fun facts.

A group of raccoons is called a "gaze."

Raccoons "see" through their hands. Really. He looked it up.

Males have something called "penis bones."

"Hmm," the Knight of Faith says. "Penis bones."

The Knight of Faith's wife refuses to answer his calls. Eventually, she phones to tell him she would like to return but only for a few days. She will stay at a hotel. She only wants to gather a few things: clothes, mementoes.

"Can we talk about this?" the Knight of Faith asks.

"I don't trust you right now, Carl," she says. He must learn to accept her decision. He is too emotional right now.

I am not too emotional, the Knight of Faith thinks. *Buddhists do not get too emotional*.

No one in The Human Condition bothers to read Epicurus, no one but Janet, the elderly woman with the Thomas the Train backpack.

"Is Epicurus right that it is irrational to fear death?" asks the Knight of

Faith. “No more reasonable than fearing the nonexistence that preceded our births?”

“Horseshit,” says Janet.

The Knight of Faith asks if happiness is the highest good. Should they eat, drink, and be merry for tomorrow they could all die?

“More horseshit,” says Janet.

“Let’s take a break,” says the Knight of Faith.

Outside the classroom, the students gather around a vending machine. The Knight of Faith tries to make small talk.

“So, did you hear that monarch butterflies will soon be extinct?” he says.

The Knight of Faith opens the bathroom window but the stench remains unbearable: racoon piss, spoiled meat. The racoon has eaten the strawberry tops at least.

It bristles and balls itself up when the Knight of Faith tries to lift it out of the tub. It bites his hand. He drops it; it scurries away.

The Knight of Faith rinses the gash under icy tap water. He reminds himself that he is a Buddhist, and Buddhists are not troubled by worldly discomforts.

The cold water reminds him of a bubbling creek an hour’s drive away, where he and his wife used to skinny-dip, back when they were students at the college.

Her gooseflesh.

“It’s a good thing I’m a Buddhist,” he says.

The Knight of Faith gives a lecture on the ancient Stoics: Seneca, Epictetus, Marcus Aurelius. Outside, the temperature drops. The trailer’s thermostat reacts by malfunctioning; the baseboard heaters hurl out gobs of hot air.

Perspiration flowers on the Knight of Faith’s dress shirt. His armpits are drenched, dripping. He needs a towel. The students gape.

Later, he notices that his wife has left a message. She may be in town on Thursday. She would prefer that he not be at their house when she gathers her things.

Please respect this decision, Carl, she types.

The Knight of Faith calls in sick to the Office of Alumnae Relations. It is a brisk autumn morning. Frost crusts fallen leaves. Someone in the neighborhood has lit a brushfire. It smells like a distant voice calling the Knight of Faith home for supper.

Surely, a Buddhist would take time to appreciate such transient, fleeting beauty?

Will the world end if the Knight of Faith does not phone any alumnae today?

It will not.

Also, his wife may be visiting soon. She must see how he has changed. The trivialities that drove them apart? He has transcended them.

He drives to a greenhouse and fills his hatchback with discounted plants, wilting dahlias and mums. He drives home. He returns to the greenhouse. He buys more.

That afternoon, he listens for the raccoon’s scurry while he crowbars up the floorboards in the living room. He dumps potting soil in the gaps and plants and waters the flowers.

He imagines his wife opening the front door.

Maybe she will fumble with her keys. Maybe she will be carrying empty cardboard boxes, and she will nudge the door open with her rump, like a waiter carrying a heavy tray of plates, backing through a swinging door. When she turns, she will see it: the garden in the heart of their home.

She will realize that he is no longer caged by worldly dichotomies: inside/outside, mine/yours. Everything is everything and all is full of love.

Maybe the raccoon will even be frolicking among the mums.

The Knight of Faith calls in sick on Thursday, and again on Friday. Sunlight crawls up the walls of the bedroom. It greys and glooms. His wife never returns.

On Sunday, he attains an epiphany. He is not a Buddhist after all. He is a stoic. Stoics are similar to Buddhists. They too radiate calm. They too

harvest wisdom from pain. Unlike Buddhists, they are not pushovers.

They eat meat. Their tranquility is manly and hard-fought.

The Knight of Faith takes off his shirt and searches the house for the racoon. He finds it in the basement, hiding under a wicker patio sofa.

He hauls it out by its scruff and wrestles it against his chest, a paroxysm of spit and tooth. He tells himself, *I feel no pain.*

“Thank you,” he says to the racoon.

He calls it a night. He goes to bed. His wounds weep into the sheets.

In class, the Knight of Faith reads aloud from Epictetus’s *Enchiridion*:

With regard to whatever things you love, remember to tell yourself always of what nature they are...If you kiss your child, or your wife, remind yourself that you are kissing a dying animal, a corpse-to-be, and thus you will not be disturbed if either of them dies.

The Knight of Faith explains how the ancient Stoics believed we must inure ourselves to loss. He gives an unusual assignment. Find a dying animal. Kiss it. Its lips, describe their taste.

Two pages. Double-spaced. Due next Tuesday.

Janet starts to complain but the Knight of Faith shuts her down.

“Shut your face, Janet,” he says. “Just. Shut. Your. Face.”

The Knight of Faith returns home to find the front door ajar. Has his wife returned? Her car is not in the driveway.

He hustles from room to room. No one is there but the racoon, which the Knight of Faith finds in the guestroom closet, hiding among tabletop games, Jenga and Scrabble.

His wife’s dresser has been emptied. Framed photographs are missing from her nightstand, pictures of her as a child, standing ankle-deep in an ocean, tossing a beachball to her father, his arms outstretched, the ball hanging suspended in midair.

Her wedding photos remain.

The Knight of Faith finds a disposable cup on the entryway table—a cold coffee drink, dregs of ice still melting at the bottom. The logo on the plastic

says *Sheetz*.

He thinks of the Open Arms Travelodge a half hour’s drive down the highway, how it shares a parking lot with a Sheetz.

He finds his wife’s car in the lot.

Inside the Open Arms, the clerk refuses to surrender her room number and reaches for the phone when the Knight of Faith starts to bellow. He stomps down corridors. He jiggles door handles. He only wants to talk.

There is a moment, after the police release him, and upon his return home, when he sees as if through his wife’s eyes. The dirt strewn across the living room. The dry husks of dead flowers embedded in it. The smell of refuse emanating from the bathroom, how could he have missed it?

He searches for the racoon and finds it back in the basement, hiding in a box of Christmas ornaments. He carries the box to the bedroom.

Balled on silvery tinsel, too weak to snarl, the racoon’s chest rises and falls. The Knight of Faith finds sour milk in the refrigerator and warms it in a saucepan. He siphons it with a turkey baster and drips it on the racoon’s lips. Later, he unfolds a paw and strokes a tiny palm.

To prepare for *The Human Condition*, the Knight of Faith rereads Kierkegaard’s *Fear and Trembling*. He is struck by Kierkegaard’s distinction between the Knight of Faith and the Knight of Infinite Resignation. When hopeless love befalls a Knight of Infinite Resignation, he loves anyway, stoically, like a tragic hero, determined to fail.

The Knight of Faith does the same. Only, his love is merry and bright. Like a Christmas song. Or a wildfire.

When a Knight of Faith dances, his feet do not touch the ground.

When God asks a Knight of Faith to sacrifice a son, he does so with a smile.

Something odd happens while driving to campus to teach. The Knight of Faith thinks of a song he has not heard in years—not since he and his wife danced to it at their wedding.

It comes on the radio.

He sings along. He drums the steering wheel. He sways and bops in his seat. His soul feels lighter than helium.

He thinks of another song he would like to hear.

“I would like to hear some funky Dixieland,” he says to the empty car.

Sure enough, the Doobie Brothers are next. Catfish jump. Blackwater rolls. Pretty mommas gonna make everything all right.

It happens again and again, song after song. Eventually, the Knight of Faith parks on the side of a road. He is so full of words; he cannot keep them inside. Now he is talking. He is making so much sense. He is saying what things are like.

When he is done, he checks the clock on his phone. The Human Condition ended hours ago.

Days later, a voice tells him to return to his car. God’s voice? His own mind? Don’t question it. Have faith. Drive.

What am I looking for?

You will know it when you see it.

The Knight of Faith drives past vacant storefronts with soaped-over windows. He drives past a muddy parking lot, cratered in puddles, where a man sells Christmas trees lashed in plastic netting.

Eventually, he finds it in a megachurch’s parking lot: an old school bus with a hand-painted “for sale” sign propped against it. A chalky shade of eggshell blue. 167,000 miles on the odometer. It seats twelve.

The church is asking \$14,000.

The Knight of Faith contemplates his joint checking and savings accounts, nearly emptied since his wife withdrew her contributions. The bus’s interior has a burnt-sugar smell, like a burnt-out electrical socket. He sits in the driver’s seat and toys with the oversized steering wheel. It feels right.

Where will he get \$14,000? He isn’t worried. He is a Knight of Faith.

Hello. He would like to introduce himself. His name is Carl Melcher.

He is the new philosophy professor at the small land grant college. He is calling because the person to whom he’s speaking has a strong record of charitable giving.

The college recently launched an innovative program. Perhaps the person with the record of charitable giving will want to support it?

It is called Better Tomorrows, an ethics class taught at a nearby prison. He teaches it himself. Yes, ethics. It is a big hit with the criminals.

They learn to regret their wrongdoings. Also, effective communication skills. They admit their insecurities. It is all very *Shawshank Redemption*.

Under his leadership, the students of Better Tomorrows recently traveled to Washington DC to compete in The Intercollegiate Ethics Bowl. Did they win? They did not. Lost to Princeton in the final round. However, the students of Better Tomorrows are like the Bad News Bears of ethics debate competitions. They are scrappy. They have can-do spirit.

Wait ‘til next year, Princeton!

We’re coming for you.

If only the person with the strong record of charitable giving would help....

“Thank you,” the Knight of Faith says, “That is very generous.”

He copies down credit card information, addresses, and social security numbers. The director of Alumnae Relations has forbidden him from returning to the office. However, he finds he can still log onto his work account from the computers in the campus’s library.

His in-box is cluttered with emails from the provost. *Re: PHIL 005. Re: classroom improprieties. Please reply.*

The Knight of Faith dials the next number on his list. Hello. His name is Carl Melcher.

The Knight of Faith returns to the megachurch. The Knight of Faith cuts a check.

He messages the students. He assures them that the emails they have received from the provost are inaccurate. The Human Condition has not

been cancelled.

There is no cancelling The Human Condition.

For their last class, there will be a fieldtrip. They will meet in the parking lot by the Roche planetarium. Attendance is mandatory. Any student who does not attend will fail. They will not graduate on time. Their lives may be ruined.

Seriously, don't fuck with him.

The students are restless. A cold drizzle falls, mist so fine it swirls under the streetlamps. The Knight of Faith is running late.

A bus rounds a corner, visible from a distance by the warm glow of its interior. It pulls into the lot. The Knight of Faith tugs the door open with a satisfyingly airy hiss.

"Welcome students of The Human Condition," he says. "Please, get on the bus."

Christmas lights festoon the interior. Gift bags wait on the seats. Tucked amid tissue paper are gift cards, candy necklaces, and hardcover copies of Kierkegaard's *Sickness unto Death*. There is a cooler of eggnog and Jell-O shots, and there are crudité platters and cocktail shrimp.

"Eat, drink, and be merry," says the Knight of Faith.

Inside, bittersweet Christmas songs play on a loop: *Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas*, *What Child is This?*

The Knight of Faith settles into the driver's seat. Beside it, on the floor, a pink plastic pet carrier. He cracks the wire door and gives the animal inside a reassuring pat, then re-latches it before whatever's inside can escape.

"Where are we going?" asks Janet.

The Knight of Faith is unsure.

Westward, surely, there are mountains, somewhere a Moriah. The Knight of Faith is prepared—with spare cannisters of gas in the utility box in case he needs to douse the bus for a burnt offering.

Maybe his wife will see them on the evening news.

Or they could reach New York City by morning. Visit the Museum of Natural History—stare at dinosaur bones and the famous blue whale. The

Knight of Faith has money for skating at Rockefeller Center.

He is not worried. He is a Knight of Faith.

When he comes to a fork in the road, he will take it.

ARTHUR KWON LEE



CONTRIBUTOR BIOS

Bjorn Bengtsson is an artist. An artist endeavored by love.

Reporter photographic and visual artist **Guilherme Bergamini** is Brazilian and graduated in Journalism. For more than two decades, he has developed projects with photography and the various narrative possibilities that art offers. The works of the artist dialogue between memory and social political criticism. He believes in photography as the aesthetic potential and transforming agent of society. Awarded in national and international competitions, Guilherme Bergamini participated in collective exhibitions in 30 countries.

Pia Bhatia lives in New Delhi, India. Her work has appeared in *Sonder Midwest*, *Southworld*, and elsewhere.

Despy Boutris's work has been published or is forthcoming in *American Poetry Review*, *American Literary Review*, *Southern Indiana Review*, *Copper Nickel*, *Colorado Review*, *The Adroit Journal*, *Prairie Schooner*, and elsewhere. Currently, she teaches at the University of Houston, works as Assistant Poetry Editor for *Gulf Coast*, and serves as Editor-in-Chief of *The West Review*.

Henry Rieve Bule is a writer and a recent graduate of Georgetown University. His personal interests in storytelling, improv performance, and healthcare have provided him with a unique combination of creative sources. He is an avid reader of high fantasy fiction and currently resides in Arlington, VA.

Michelle Cadiz is a poet from the Philippines. She is currently finishing her undergraduate degree in biology.

Eric Chamberlain is a film director, composer and former newspaper illustrator living in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Over the course of a life spent in artistic pursuits, his art has evolved to match changes in his experience, personality, and motivation. His series *Windows Into Eternity* is a reflection of this experience, wherein he seeks not to create depictions of recognizable objects and places but rather to capture the essence. He has also written a self-help book, *The Eye of Gogi*, so that others may benefit from his experience.

Sean Cho A. is an MFA candidate at the University of California Irvine. His work appears or is forthcoming in *The Portland Review*, *The Dallas Review*, *The Mangrove* and elsewhere. He is a staff reader for *Ploughshares*. In the summer of 2019 he was a Mary K. Davis scholarship recipient for the Bear River Writing Conference. Sean's manuscript *Not Bilingual* was a finalist for the Write Bloody Publishing Poetry Prize.

C.M. Clark is a "poet's poet's poet," whose work has appeared throughout the U.S. and in Canada. Publication credits include *Painted Bride Quarterly*, *Prime Number Magazine*, *The Paddock Review*, *Ovenbird*, *SWWIM's Poem-a-Day*, *the South Florida Poetry Journal*, and *Gulf Stream Magazine*. Her work has been anthologized in collections including Demeter Press's *Travellin' Mama*, *Voices from the Fierce Intangible World* (SoFloPoJo), and in *Chasing Light* (Yellow Jacket Press), a pairing of poems and photos of Old Tampa. Clark continues to collaborate with artists from other media, including a partnership with contemporary composer Andres Carrizo; a video project, "String Theory," with painter Georges LeBar; and Miami's SWEAT Broadside Project, with artists Dorothy Simpson Krause and Kim Yantis. Clark was runner-up for the Slate Roof Press Chapbook Contest and Elyse Wolf Prize, a finalist for the Rane Arroyo Chapbook Series, and semi-finalist for Molotov Cocktail Press's Shadow Award. She also served as inaugural Poet in Residence at the Deering Estate Artists Village in Miami, and has been a presenter at the Miami Book Fair. She is the author of full-length works *Charles Deering Forecasts the Weather & Other Poems* (Solution Hole Press, 2012) and *Dragonfly* (Solution Hole Press, 2016)), as well as the chapbook *The Five Snouts* (Finishing Line Press, 2017). Her recent collection, *Exoskeletal*, was released in May, 2019.

Jodie Clark is a linguist at Sheffield Hallam University in the UK. Originally from the Eastern Shore of Maryland, she moved to England in 2002 after five years in France (Paris and Strasbourg). Her fiction explores characters who discover (or fail to discover) how intimacy is embedded in the structure of language. The idea at the heart of all her work, both scholarly and creative, is that when people inhabit language, it transforms them.

Cole Depuy, the winner of the Negative Capability Press Spring 2020 Poetry Contest, is a Ph.D. student at SUNY Binghamton & recipient of the Provost's Doctoral Summer Fellowship. His poetry is forthcoming or has appeared in *The Penn Review*, *Ilanot Review*, *The Maynard*, *The Paterson Literary Review*, & elsewhere. He is also a poetry reader for *Harpur Palate* & instructor for the Binghamton Poetry Project.

Marco Etheridge lives and writes in Vienna, Austria. His fiction has appeared in *Blue Moon Review*, *Literally Stories*, *Dime Show Review*, *Five on the Fifth*, *Storgy*, *Inlandia Journal*, *Manzano Mountain Review*, *Every Day Fiction*, *Dead Mule School of Southern Literature*, *Literary Yard*, *Mobius: A Journal for Social Change*, *Czykmate*, *Cleaning Up the Glitter*, *Fleas on the Dog*, and *Writing Disorder*. His non-fiction work has been featured at *Route 7* and *Bluntly Magazine*. Marco's third novel, *Breaking the Bundles*, is available at fine online booksellers. His author website is: <https://www.marcoetheridgefiction.com/>

Mollie Fox is a Seattle-based poet and memoirist. Her work is an intimate investigation of her own memories, their illusiveness, and their infinite ability to both protect and wound. In her poetry, she lilt between sardonic and romantic, blurring the line between who we are and who we were. You can see more of what Mollie does at molliefox.tumblr.com

Tiago Jazel isn't an artist, all the work is made by his autonomous hand. He just stares. Inspired by great masters as Vrubel and Monet, **Van Lanigh** creates figurative and landscape pieces. Her unique style is a reaction to abstractionism in an attempt to capture surrealistic yet casual reality. This is especially underlined by new forms and materials used in Van Lanigh's artworks aimed to achieve the viewer's resonance between visual effect and message of the painting. One of her experiments is getting Pointillism into 3D space by making a series of human-face sculptures with small colorful handcrafted polymer clay balls. The series "Chasing Rainbows" is about the perception of the world of feelings. No one feels exactly the one emotion at the time, it's always the crazy waterfall with undertones of sensations. And this rainbow of feelings Van Lanigh interprets in her works by running away from the real world of colours to the imaginary universe of impressions.

Arthur **Kwon Lee** is a Korean-American painter best known for capturing art historical imagery through a combination of gestural mark making, expressive color harmonies and cultural mythologies across the globe. Lee has been awarded by George Washington University, the Overseas National Institute, the Korean Artist Association and the Corcoran Gallery of Art. Lee's influences go across the board from his relationship to the Jung Society of Washington, social and financial investment into local religious organizations and a lifelong commitment in martial arts.

Monica MG is a fine art painter born in Jerez, an Andalusian town in Southern Spain, and living in Aurora Colorado since 2005. With a background in interior and exterior design, Monica developed her fine art painting skills over years of practice and self-study. Monica has developed a signature style of embellished painting combining acrylic pouring technique while adding very specific details with traditional oils. Her consistent theme remains true; to use colors to symbolize a variety of emotions, and truths to bring about calmness that inspires tranquility.

Benjamin Murray is a graduate of Eastern Washington University's MFA program and an advisor for Transformation Tuesday, a poetry and performance event with a focus on marginalized voices. He enjoys roaming the woods of the PNW for Sasquatch and kayaking rivers. His work has been published or is forthcoming in *Arkana*, *Cobalt*, *Rock & Sling*, *Sweet Tree Review*, *Stone Coast Review*, *River River*, and *Construction Literary Magazine*.

Emily Rankin was born in Riverside, California and attended university in Abilene, TX, where she received a BFA in 2011. Her body of work ranges from graphic design and scenic painting to collaborative performances with *Verstehen*, an improvisational performance series which incorporates live painting, sound, and electronics. She is currently based in New Mexico. You can find her online at www.eerankinart.com.

Joshua Shaw is a philosophy professor who began writing fiction mid-career, mostly because it made him happier to be alive. His stories have appeared in *Hobart*, *Booth*, *Split Lip*, *Sundog Lit*, *Clever*, and *Kenyon Review Online*.

George L Stein is a writer and photographer in the New Jersey/New York metropolitan area. Interest in monochrome, film and digital photography and urban decay/architectural subject matter has come to include street photography, fashion, fetish, collage, and oppositional/juxtapositional projects in digital format. His work has been published in *Midwest Gothic*, *NUNUM*, *Montana Mouthful*, *Out/Cast*, *The Fredericksburg Literary and Art Review*, and *DarkSide magazine*.

Terin Weinberg is an MFA candidate and Graduate Teaching Assistant at Florida International University in Miami, Florida. She graduated with degrees in Environmental Studies and English from Salisbury University in Maryland. She serves as a reader for *GulfStream Magazine*. Terin has been published in journals including: *The Normal School*, *Flyway: Journal of Writing & Environment* & *Split Rock Review*. She was recently featured in *Rewilding: Poems for the Environment*, a 2020 anthology. Her work is forthcoming in *Glassworks Magazine* & *Small Orange Journal*.



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