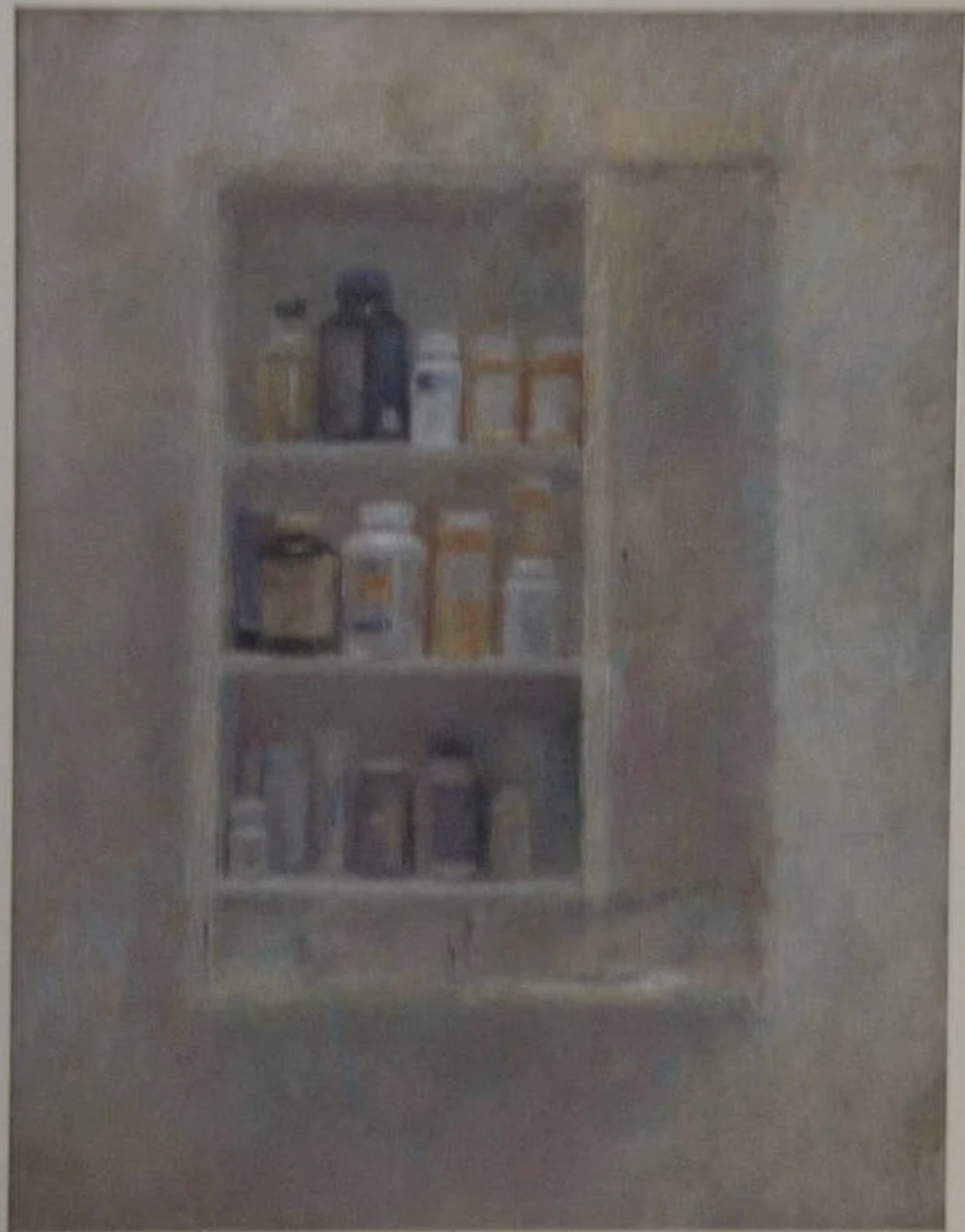


**Abre**



# ISSUE ONE

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**COVER ART:**

**“Medicine Cabinet” by Antonio y Soledad Páez**

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# TO VENICE

*by* Ellis Shuman

I meet her on the vaporetto.

“First time in Venice?” she asks.

“Yes. I’m scouting out locations for a new film,” I reply, but then immediately regret revealing too much information. I stand near the rail, glancing at the warehouses on the waterfront as our water bus speeds toward its docking at St. Mark’s Square. I turn back to her. “What about you?”

“I’ve been here several times before,” she says. “But I keep returning.”

“I detect a British accent.”

“London.” She covers her mouth and coughs, and then says, “Born and raised there. And you? American, no doubt.”

“New York. Born and raised there.”

This makes her laugh. For the first time, I take a good look at her. Fortyish, I assume, perhaps a few years younger than me. Tall, slim, with a very pleasant face and brownish hair held tight in a youthful ponytail. Casual slacks and blouse, slightly more elegant than my own blue jeans and T-shirt emblazoned with ‘Italy’ on a tricolor flag. No wedding ring noticeable, which makes me subconsciously cover mine. Then, realizing I’m staring, I turn away, glancing at the other passengers on the morning boat ride.

“What sort of film? Documentary?”

Instead of answering her, I hold out my hand. “I’m Peter.”

“Suzanne,” she replies. “Are you going to the Duomo?”

“The palace, actually. Doge’s Palace.”

“Magnificent place. I’m sure it will be the perfect setting for your documentary.”

“What are you doing in Venice? Or is that too personal to ask?”

“No, it’s fine.” She opens her purse, searches through it for several seconds and eventually pulls out a small container of lip balm. She spreads it on her lips—pink, slender lips. I force myself to look away. She is very attractive.

She puts the small tube back in her bag and faces me. “I’m actually here to say goodbye.”

“Goodbye?”

Before she has a chance to explain, the vaporetto’s motor switches gear. The boat has reached the dock, and it’s time to disembark.

“It was nice meeting you Peter.” Instead of shaking my hand, a short coughing spell brings her hand to her mouth.

“Maybe we’ll run into each other again,” I offer, hopeful.

“Maybe,” she says with an inviting smile.

And then she’s gone, disappearing in the throngs of tourists. I follow the crowd, over a bridge spanning one of the city’s multitude of canals and down the other side. Past the hawkers selling shirts and scarves, Venetian party masks and other overpriced souvenirs. Past the line of impatient visitors waiting to ride the elevator to the top of the St. Mark’s Campanile bell tower. Past the piles of wooden planks that serve as walkways when the plaza is flooded. And finally, to iconic St. Mark’s Square.

Venice. I had been here as a teenager and now I’m back. I am here to make a dream come true but there’s no guarantee I’ll be successful in what I plan to do.

- - -

“So, how was Doge’s Palace?”

I look up from my table, and there she is, two rows over. Suzanne. “I didn’t see you sitting there.”

“Why don’t you join me?”

Her invitation surprises me. I nod at the waiter as he graciously picks up my wineglass and carries it to my new place at Suzanne’s table.

“Doge’s Palace was remarkable,” I say as I sit down. “Beautiful artwork, lavish décor. Gilded ceilings and ornate architecture. But what fascinated me the most was the tour I took through the secret passages.”

“What secret passages?”

I sip my wine. Pinot Grigio, so good. There is a twinkle in Suzanne’s eyes and I quickly return my gaze to the wineglass. “I toured the palace’s archives with a small group. Its torture chambers and prison cells. Places tourists rarely see, the guide said. And we saw Casanova’s cell.”

“Casanova? Really?”

“The famous lover, no less. He was a scam artist and an adventurer, and he was held prisoner there. Until he managed to escape.”

“I’ve been to Doge’s Palace many times and knew nothing about that. There’s always something new to discover in Venice. So, tell me. Is that where you’re going to film your documentary? In Casanova’s prison cell?”

“No, not exactly.” How much should I say? I’ll never see her again after our chance meal together in a small trattoria up the street from St. Mark’s Square. But still, I hesitate.

“Come on, don’t be shy,” she says, reaching out and touching my hand, which I quickly pull away.

“It’s not a documentary. In fact, I don’t know if my film will ever be made.”

“What kind of film is it?”

“It’s a thriller. Actually, much more than a thriller.”

“Go on.”

So, I forge ahead with my explanation, one that I had voiced many times to family and friends. An explanation that often resulted in ridicule and rejection. But then, this is my dream, so why should I be ashamed of sharing my vision?

“It’s a time-traveling adventure thriller. A film that takes place in Venice, and it stars some of Italy’s most well-known historic figures.”

“What are you talking about? I don’t understand.”

“Casanova. Marco Polo. Michelangelo. Mussolini is the villain. They all play roles in my film.”

She laughs, and this causes her to start coughing. She drinks her water and then, realizing I’m serious, she apologizes. “Excuse me, but I don’t have the faintest clue about—what did you say it was called? A time-traveling thriller?”

“It’s a unique concept, I admit. I just hope someone will appreciate my originality.”

“Why in Italy, of all places?”

“I came as a teenager with my parents. I fell in love with the cities we visited. Florence, Rome. And of course, Venice. My favorite city of all. As I began working on the script for my film, I knew that much of the action would take place in Venice. The canals, the fog, the palaces. Perfect settings for the movie.”

“Time-traveling film. Imagine that,” she says.

The waiter appears at our table to take our orders. *Tagliatelle ai funghi porcini* for her, *Gnocchi con scampi e zucchini* for me.

“Can I order you a glass of wine?” I offer.

“No, I can’t drink.”

“Can’t? Too early in the day?”

“Something like that,” she says. “Tell me more about your film. Which studio is producing it?”

I look away for a moment. Why would she be interested in knowing that I am trying to produce this film on my own after being turned down by every studio and film agent I had approached? I’m way out of my league, I know, but I refuse to let my dream escape me. I reply simply, “It’s an independent production.”

“Did you study filmmaking?”

“I took some courses in college, and I’ve always wanted to study screenwriting, but life took me in different directions. I have plenty of work yet to do on my script, and I still need to find investors to fund the project. But enough about me. What about you? You said something about coming here to say goodbye...”

“Oh, yes, I did mention that. But, can we not talk about that now? Let’s just enjoy our meal, shall we? The weather is brilliant, unseasonably warm, and here we are in Venice. A magical city.”

“To Venice!” I say, raising my wineglass in a toast.

“To Venice!” she replies.

- - -

Burano island is totally unlike anything I ever imagined about Venice. Instead of masses of crowds standing in line to enter the Duomo or pushing to position themselves for the best selfie angle, Burano is nearly deserted, a quaint laid-back fishing village across the lagoon from the city.

“Don’t you just love it?”

I smile at Suzanne as we stroll along the narrow canal, past one pastel-colored house after another. It's early morning and the few souvenir shops are still closed. We cross over a wooden bridge and continue up the picturesque walkway on the other side.

"I hope you're not upset I convinced you to come here," she says, linking her arm in mine. The gesture surprises me and instinctively I pull back.

"Burano wasn't on my itinerary. Actually, I had never heard of it before. In my research for the trip, I read about Murano, where they make glass. But not Burano."

"Too many tourists in Murano. And anyway, you can buy Murano glassware here, if you're so interested. Peter, I'm getting winded. Let's sit down at this café. We can get espresso and *essiz*. S-shaped biscuits—simple, but quite lovely."

While the waitress prepares our coffee, we gaze out at the water, at the small fishing boat pattering in the distance, far from shore. A breeze picks up and Suzanne draws her sweater tight. And then she coughs repeatedly. She retrieves a plastic water bottle from her bag and takes a long drink.

"Are you okay?"

"My apologies. I can't get rid of this cough. Tell me more about your film. You mentioned Casanova?"

"Do you really want to hear about it?"

"Yes, of course!"

"Well, let me set the scene. Casanova is imprisoned in Doges Palace by the dreaded Council of Ten, the rulers of Venice. They have sentenced him for his immoral behavior as a seducer of women. His cell is dark and dreary. Rats abound. Casanova escapes through a hole in the ceiling and crawls his way to the cell of another prisoner. Are you sure you want to hear this?"

"I find it fascinating!"

“Well, the two men dig through the floor and drop down into the main hall below. The hall is so crowded with noblemen and noblewomen that no one notices their sudden appearance. And it is there that Marco Polo is waiting for them.”

“Marco Polo?”

“I told you it’s a time-traveling action film.”

“Marco Polo, yes, I see! Where does Michelangelo fit into the plot?”

“He’s waiting in the boat in which Marco Polo will transport Casanova to China.”

Suzanne can’t help herself and breaks out laughing. Her laughter causes her to cough, and she reaches for her water.

“Are you sure you’re okay? You don’t sound so good.”

“I’ve been ill,” she tells me, but she doesn’t elaborate. Her coughing eventually subsides. “So, tell me, Peter, is your film intended to be comical?”

“No, it’s an action movie! Historical figures come to life. Casanova and Marco Polo are like Marvel superheroes!”

“You have to admit there are elements of humor in what you’re describing. It’s a bit far-fetched.”

“Okay, I’ll give you that. But it’s not slapstick comedy, if that’s what you’re implying. Anyone who’s read the script believes it has a lot of merit. My wife says it’s really good. Oh, I’m married, by the way.”

“I knew that, Peter,” she says, nodding toward the wedding ring I had subconsciously hidden from view. “Your wife doesn’t mind your coming to Venice on your own to plan the film?”

“She knows it’s been my lifelong dream to make this film, and she’s been very supportive. She actually insisted I come to Venice, saying my script will be that much better if I visited the places where the action takes place. I had time off from work, so

it was now or never. I couldn't miss this opportunity to finally be here on the ground, in Venice."

"Bravo for you," Suzanne says, sipping her espresso.

"Now, you must tell me something about yourself. You said you've been here before, in Venice?"

"I've traveled extensively in Italy."

"Yes?" I say, urging her to go on.

"My husband was a travel writer. He wrote for travel magazines, Lonely Planet and such. He reviewed hotels and restaurants. We went to the most exotic places, the most luxurious resorts. Michelin-starred restaurants. Traveling with him on the job, we lived like royals. We did it in style, first class, going everywhere, literally, but we kept returning to Italy. And to Venice. There's something special about Venice, something unique. The canals, of course, The islands, the food, the culture. St. Mark's Square when it's flooded."

Suzanne pauses, as if her thoughts are wandering along the waterways of Venice across the lagoon as we speak, but then she turns to me.

"Well, that was what we did, and what drew me here again now."

"You don't travel with your husband anymore?"

"He passed three years ago."

"Oh, I'm sorry!"

"It's alright. I'm here on my own this time."

"Are you writing about Venice?"

"No, I'm not a writer. I'm a social worker who has always been passionate about travel. I'm returning to the places I visited with my husband. Remembering."

I don't know how to respond to that, so I finish my espresso and put down the empty cup on its saucer. I call the waitress to pay the bill.

“Don't let what I said get you down, Peter.”

“What?”

“Your film, that it sounds a bit comical. You'll make it one day. I know it. Your dream will come true.”

- - -

We stand outside the entrance of her hotel. I have never cheated on my wife before, and I doubt I'm capable of doing it now. But that isn't the only thing holding me back. Suzanne is stunning, but I'm not really attracted to her. Maybe I'm attracted to the idea of touring Venice with a beautiful stranger, someone who knows much more about the city than me and who can guide me over its bridges and to its islands. Maybe the notion of not being alone when I had planned to be alone is what attracts me.

Before I have a chance to say anything, Suzanne starts another of her now-familiar coughing spells. For a moment she seems to lose her balance, as if she is going to fall, and I reach out to steady her. Finally, Suzanne catches her breath, thanking me with her eyes.

“Listen, Peter, I haven't been totally forthcoming with you. Do you have time to come in for a minute, just to the lobby? I have something to tell you.”

We sit in silence, waiting for the bartender. She orders a Diet Coke, and I opt for Pinot Grigio. At last, we receive our drinks, but Suzanne ignores hers and looks at me. There is a sadness in her eyes, something I didn't detect earlier. I wait patiently for her to begin.

“Peter, I said that I had been ill, that I couldn't get relief from my coughing. That is not the full explanation for my condition. The truth is, I am still ill. Very ill, as a matter of fact.”

“Oh, I’m sorry to hear that!”

“It’s serious; all the doctors concur. I’ll spare you the bloody details, but let me say that my disease is terminal. I decided that as long as I’m capable, I will continue traveling. I couldn’t help myself. I had to return to Venice. To the hotel where my husband and I stayed, to some of the restaurants where we dined. Did I mention to you that he proposed over an evening snack of Campari and *cicchetti*? That was the first time we came here together, before we were married. And now I’ve come back. Alone.”

“To say goodbye,” I say, the words escaping my mouth as I recall what she had told me when we first met.

“To say goodbye,” she repeats. “I don’t know if you take memories into the next world, but if so, I want to remember Venice. I’m not sure I believe in God, or in Heaven. Perhaps I’ll meet my husband again, maybe not. But I hope I’ll remember Venice.”

“You’ll remember Venice.” I reach out and place my hand on her arm. It’s the first time I have initiated a physical gesture, but of course it is not suggestive in any way.

“Yes,” she says, raising her Coke. “To Venice!”

“To Venice!” I say, as we clink our glasses.

- - -

The last time I see her is on the vaporetto. She is standing at the rail, facing the dock as the waterbus pulls away from the city, away from me. She raises her hand to signal goodbye, but then, when the boat is quite far away, she brings her hand to her mouth. Unfortunately, seeing her cough will be my last memory of her.

I have two more days left in Venice. There are more places to visit, more palaces to visit. I have yet to travel the full length of the Grand Canal and I’ve yet to decide whether to ride a gondola—something I can’t imagine doing without my wife at my

side. I wonder if Venice is a suitable setting for my film. It isn't a city of adventure; it's more a city of refined culture. Of historic beauty.

I don't know if my dream of making a film will ever come true. Casanova escaping with Marco Polo from the Doges Palace. Michelangelo traveling with the two of them to China. Yes, Suzanne was right. My time-traveling thriller is a comedy in many ways, but what's wrong with that?

Suzanne's vaporetto is far from shore, getting smaller and smaller until it fades from view. I turn around and join the crowds streaming toward St. Mark's Square. I walk past the souvenir stands and the tourists aiming for the perfect selfie in front of the Bridge of Sighs. Next time, I'll come here with my wife.

A smile forms on my lips as I think about my brief acquaintance with Suzanne, about our talks and our visit to Burano. To remember our time together, to say goodbye, I raise my hand, as if making her a toast.

"To Venice!" I say aloud as I take my place in the line leading into the Duomo.

# GILGAMSH, OR A WRESTLING PROBLEM

*by* Harold Liminal

that

Nobody can well explain how this condition of No Dreams or DreamLessNess started, but it did. Some blamed it on a curse or something in the water or electromagnetic rays from outer space. Whatever the cause, that people stopped dreaming. The Mayor who was a shameless tool tried to step out in front to claim the benefits. Mayor ItsMe stood before the ancient wall downtown and did a press conference:

"Cmon PEOPLE we always knew that dreams were dangerous- mere neuro nonsense interrupting our practical everyday lives. I for one believe in a dreamless future for everybody.."

and people clapped...

this is a story about wrestling

this is a story about ancient walls

this is a story that flexes and will become whatever you need it to to become

and then Ralf woke up with a start...

excavate

excavate

excavate

this is a profound story ; you will cry and may never recover

Ralf couldn't wrap his head around the situation. He missed his dreams- he missed remembering or trying to remember the next day. He wasn't a writer by profession but he bought a notebook at the dollar store and began inventing dreams just to remember. It was an important ritual before bed. He would put on his PJs to write down the dream that never happened.

Dreams about sailing in a giant ship. Dreams about romance in foreign lands. Dreams about flying over the town and landing in a secret cave. He documented all of these in his fake dream book. And then out of nowhere, he started writing a very peculiar dream about people getting replaced; one of those fragmented dreams where a disturbing situation arises without a solution. Ralf was shocked by what he wrote but he could not stop. He wrote all night. And the next day his dream seemed to come true.

Ralf went in to work and this lady was sitting at Bruce's desk wearing a smirk. She was wearing Bruce's clothes but they didn't fit and neither did the smile- she kept trying to do Bruce's laugh which sounded more like a dying parrot.

"Morning Ralf," dying parrot laugh...

"Morning-"

he stopped and stared

"Can I help you with something?"

"Where's Bruce?"

and then she looked up with this intense gaze and said:

"but I am Bruce - right?"

and Ralf said, "yeah -of course."

and in that moment something unzipped -

words without recognition

Ralf didn't take a lunch break. It would've been impossible. This situation with Fake Bruce was too much; no one else seemed to notice or maybe they were all in on it.

Ralf wasn't going to say anything, so he kept making spreadsheets with fake numbers. He kept repeating to himself in a shrill voice, "...but I'm Bruce," tap tap tapping away, as if each click was building a fence around his twitchy body.

He heard people say, "Night Bruce...", "Enjoy the Weekend, Bruce..."

"Animals," he muttered to himself.

And then without warning Fake Bruce was standing by his desk observing him.

Fake Bruce said, "so what's going on Buddy?"

"making reports."

"Ah- yes- reports," in a fake sunny voice

"So where's Bruce?"

He surprised himself, the question just popped out.

They looked at each other in silence a long time.

Then Fake Bruce smiled and said, "Lemme give you a lift home."

and Ralf said, "No, I couldn't possibly trouble you. It's late."

And Fake Bruce said, "Exactly why I insist, it's no bother."

Somehow Ralf was now completely and utterly trapped in this situation.

So be it, and momentarily he was stuck to his chair, but then flew up and bounded after Bruce who walked with a purposeful stride. They got to Bruce's car in the parking garage, a sleek black vehicle, like something from a spy movie in the 1950's.

And that's when Bruce announced, You drive and tossed the keys which Ralf immediately caught. He shrugged, slid in behind the driver's side. He did as instructed.

Of course they didn't go to Ralf's apartment. Soon they were on an old country road, leading far away from town.

Bruce rolled down the window and remarked, "but it's important to get out of dodge sometimes right, Ralfi?"

"Of course," said Ralf.

"Just clears the mind," said Bruce.

"Undoubtedly."

They drove for hours, the light draining from the murky green sky, the trees doing their thing, twisting and haunting automobiles as they passed.

Ralf knew things were getting worse, but he kept his eyes on the road. Actually he was no longer driving, the road moving thru him; whatever control he had fell away. Ralf considered his options; he could open the door and throw himself into the road or drive into a tree at 80 miles per hour, but neither was possible, not because of fear, but because of now being under Bruce's spell. This Fake Bruce possessed a power. Behind her sunglasses and bored smile lurked an energy which attracted and terrified.

"Ok Yep we're here," announced Bruce and Ralf turned the black knife car into a gravel parking lot by the jagged road.

"Ok."

Bruce produced a giant flashlight and beckoned Ralf to follow her into the woods.

"Let's go."

They walked for over an hour without speaking. The woods were like no other Ralf had seen. Shadows of large birds slipped from behind branches, the trees hissed, and the air was thick with sweat and cedar. They came to a clearing.

Bruce aimed the flashlight at some branches and said, "Over there, clear that stuff."

It was a dream shack; Ralf had heard of these, but thought it was a rumor- apparently not.

"Well, what're you waiting for?"

Fake Bruce watched Ralf as he removed the branches, opened the door and they went inside. The dream shack was cool and still; there was a small table glowing with candles and a record player- somebody must've set this up. Ralf was gripped by questions, but he wasn't going to ask. He sensed Bruce waiting for that and he refused to give her the satisfaction. They sat at the table. Bruce produced a bottle of liquor and she drank, passed Ralf the bottle and he drank and passed it back. Bruce then stood and poured the remains around the perimeter of the Dream Shack. Yeah this is a ritual, announced Bruce. A ritual is a way to move when you can no longer move and if you didn't know before Ralf- that's your problem - you can no longer move.

She opened the phonograph and lay down the needle- a scratchy recording of piano music started. Bruce looked down at the candles; Ralf didn't know what to do, so he did the same; looking at the candles and listening to the scratchy piano-

and then the record skipped, the candles blew out and Bruce was on the floor screaming... flailing her arms and muttering

*"what we call storytelling as we adore nonsense, the one part of the brain talking to the other, but don't the gods demand data- don't they? sure they do and everyone is so top down now, no one listens to the perimeter, the guts that speak, remember when ancient people would tear the guts from an animal, place them on an altar and ask the guts questions, that was true data!"*

*Just like the Ancient Story of Gilgamesh which of course isn't really about Gilgamesh, it's about Enkidu- his wild innocent Buddy- a Buddy Comedy or Tragedy- hmm, but anyways the main character is always a trick because people never listen, they look out to the horizon for something that does not arrive. And if some wild innocent be-comes human we wonder well how did that happen? No one ever follows innocence back to the source ..."*

Bruce then stood up and brushed the dust from her slacks and matter of factly explained-

"you know Ralf, in the story of Gilga Mesh, the ancients relied on these dreams for precise instructions. Decision fused with Image. Some people say, I only care for Real Life as if they know what that is. But we know this dream carries a force as Gilgamesh speaks of sex and death and making names. For the making of a name is everything..."

she looked at him as if to pull an answer from his guts.

"Making a name is the original shield against dust.. the ancients developed a language to record business transactions- counting and language developed side by side. And so GilgaMesh and Enkidu set out to slay the monster Humbaba to build their names.."

And Ralf nodded as if to admit he had zero idea what she was saying.

## **UTUPIA**

Mayor ItsMe then said:

"Look People I know that there is so much concern around this situation of No-Dreams! BUT SERIOUSLY FOLKS, let me tell you I've been consulting with my X-Perts, a series of mid-level perverts, cronies and unfeeling wackos in the boardroom and from what I can see this is great news! People are gonna sleep better and be more productive; studies show that dreamlessness improves sex and delays inflammation-okay I made that part up but I AM THE MAYOR hee hee. Still there's all kinds of benefits! You gotta look to the Future, not to the sleep, because sleep is for cowards People. You think I got this big important job by consulting nocturnal visions? I mean a little bit, but still...and for centuries we homo sapes were obsessed with dreams like movies, but in the end it's not about people, it's about projection- Yall understand? No ? Good."

The Mayor's Rant in the Big Micro Phone echoed against the Nothing in People's Heads. The Sleep Nothing was whispering to them. The Dreams drying up and they were Emptified.

this new existence came to light slowly. No one spoke of it at first, except the Mayor doing his 'public service.'

## **THE THEORY OF THE ANCIENT WALL**

On the other side of town there was an ancient wall and Mayor ItsMe was gonna tear it down-

"It's an EYE-sore People, meaning sore for me and worse for you. So what to do? It's exciting- we are gonna replace this old ugly wall with a giant LIVE TO WORK CENTER where people can live to work 24/7- YES!"

And he raised his eyes and people clapped with no feeling.

but then what was the actual truth of the ancient wall or talking wall as some called it?

The Mayor did another press conference- he loved these.

"Be-Cause architecture demands health so we need the right kind of buildings to regulate metabolism and blood pressure. Okay I made that part up, but studies do show things and you believe what I'm saying because it sounds right. We will have images and structures that build up life- YES!"

Right then the word **FRAUD** appeared on the wall and everyone held their breath except the Mayor didn't see what was behind him. As always with Photo Ops. His People consulted the video footage and shrugged. And they scheduled to bulldoze this wall that existed for centuries...

This is a story about image. This is a story about what we tolerate, about what appears and the distance between

.. but then it's too late - yaddda yadda yadda

Mayor ItsMe did have a plan which was for the people in the town to see the Right Kinds of Images so he hired more X-Perts to design a Museum of Correct Images-

MAYOR ItsMe spoke from his Bug Eyed Face:

"People! We will design the future with bright ideas okay! Nothing random and everything just so..."

And he raised his eyes so people knew when to clap.

## **ARTIFACTS**

then Bruce said:

"in Gilgamesh THE STORY IS THE ARTI-FACT... some people believe Arti-facts are ancient objects that speak to us- walls or jars or bones and they build Museums to worship these pieces. Well I say the story is the original Arti-fact- what we do not dig up or display but lives between our ears -YEP..

the bigger question is your ability to get the message- Are you following me Bonehead Ralf?"

"No."

Ralf was thinking on the Old Wall, when he went and visited the Old Wall to get inspiration for his dream book. Perhaps dreams dried up in other people's heads but Ralf had some idea to reinvent dreaming. And this was somewhat remarkable as ideas rarely came to Ralf but now he followed a feeling or an ache. After the press conference he snuck back to the Old Wall with his dream book and started sketching. And this one image came of everyone getting replaced.

What do walls do? for instance a wall is the original immune system, protecting citizens and sealing them inside. The wall is a sexual symbol that defies space and practical jokes.

Gilgamesh was busy building walls for a wall is both stupid and eloquent. It asks are you in or out?

But to get replaced is to be a part of something.

**BRUCE TALKING TO HERSELF..**

then she says:

"OK

but we know

that NAMES ARE SPELLS and we are held together by NAMES. Even the wrong name serves a purpose..

Do you understand Ralfi Boy that when GilgaMesh and Enkidu went into the woods it was all about making a name? Start your Engines Kids!"

She grabbed Ralf and led him back outside into those humming woods.

"It's the same as us right now

Can you sense it right now?

The terror and glamor of those ancient woods that anything can happen-  
it's in the air."

She sniffed melo dramatically-

"Meanwhile you expected another blank day at the office for this is how we survive- by shooting blanks - from one slow death to the next .. but this method evolved to prevent people from ripping each other to shreds- altho this forest might be Humbaba's forest and and so you proly ain't safe out here either-"

she cackled

"Who?" asked Ralf with his blank stupefied face.

"Hum-Baba

Hum Baba was the ancient monster and the protector of the Cedar Forest- he was hired by the gods. Actually the monster was a question for it fell before Gilgamesh and begged for life but Gilga shrugged, chopped down Humbaba and paraded around town with the head.

Sometimes the monster is the hero. But don't tell anyone I said that - Damn am I dream drunk again...?

So then these two warriors go into the ancient forest like now, Gilga the spoiled royal and Enkidu the wild innocent. Enkidu got tempted and transformed. One minute he's running wild and then this priestess flashes him and WHAM - his eyes are open to Laws and the other beasts run away.

Gilga was crashing parties, Gilga sleeping with whoever so they sent this animal to tame him-

And Enkidu goes to stop Gilgamesh and they wrestled and then this thought happened:

*if I die, does the name go with me or does it echo?*

if you ask me that's gotta be why Gilgamesh suggested they make adventures so their names would last for EVER

but maybe it does the opposite because afterall lust is lust.."

and then Bruce said -

The Truth is Ralf

WE ARE FOOD FOR DREAMS

and in this process of Replacing

WE ARE FOOD FOR DREAMS and

and in this process of retrieving data

some of these creepy dreams

might be watching us sleep and planning moves

fuck are we lost ?"

Xasperated

Bruce threw her high heel shoes at a tree; she was now hiking super fast in her tights, slipping on leaves

and Bruce said:

"I resent this situation, I mean messages from the past- like I read an ancient poem and I left home base to come here into this dangerous forest with one of my employees- WHY?"

SIMPLE!

it's staff development, I develop the people who work for me or with me and now it seems we had to get lost and I'm a little perturbed and scared- you know even bosses are allowed to get scared- yeah it's true- for what is our authority- to act like authorities meaning to protect the rules - who's rules?

- oh damn I'm being too honest again..."

and she pulled out a bottle of some thing and took a long pull.

BRUCE then boozily sneered:

"Well Cmon Ralfi I thought you were a freaking genius so why not have a vision or something that tells us where to go you little pimple on the face of the sky!"

Ralf was shocked-

that was a harsh thing for her to say.

Ralf said,

"I thought that we can't have dreams, I mean I thought people can't do that anymore and I had this idea of our brains like egg shells in the trash.."

Bruce snapped,

"RALF you need to really knock it off okay. Your poetry or whatever is so freakin lame right now-

first of all - the number one fact is that we are living in a surveillance state right now- yeah- yep- so if you've been dreaming or doing anything horny or heartfelt it stands to reason it's being recorded by operatives. That shouldn't surprise you- such scandals are constant now and do allow for progress- you follow me?"

"I'm trying ..."

"well then come here you cute widdle dumbass-"

and Ralf fell before Bruce and she held him close

to lose all sense is the way to make sense

**the WRESTLING MOMENT number one**

at which point BRUCE seized Ralf and pronounced

"Here Is The Deal Ralfi

a dream crisis happened

we paid big money for this crisis

a crisis is afterall

an investment in futures and possible ad-ventures

"you wanna know what I saw Ralfi Boy?"

her eyes locked onto Ralf's and became geometric-  
squares and circles flying upward and Ralf whined

*"what did you see?"*

"you were wrestling.."

"me?"

"Yep- and there you were- wrapped up in this cuute little outfit with a cape and you were flipping bodies like a wild star.."

"so it's a symbol?"

"NO!

nothing about wrestling is symbolic !

Wrestling is just Wrestling!"

AND then WHAM!

RALF was backstage at the arena, he could hear the roar of the crowd and he looked down at his knobby knees below glittery shorts and felt the cape on his neck. Was this the moment? to move from sweaty woods to cool dressing room where the hairs on his neck stood up. His body was way ahead of him for we are the fear and adrenaline machines. And then Ralf began to think as we often mull over petty details before a death action -

Ralf said to himself:

but seriously, why do wrestling outfits expose so much flesh? is it about humiliation built on power or the power of humiliation, where the rubber body bounces into the ring so this arena becomes a version of those ancient woods ?

All the wrestlers that Ralf saw on tv seemed to be made out of rubber- the big bodies that bounce. But Ralf's body was made of dirt and newspaper. Ralf was a house plant.

**humiliation\_**

and through the Door

he could hear the crowd chanting, "Ralf Ralf Ralf!"

"Are you ready to wrestle?" she said

"No."

Bruce lit up a cig and made calculator eyes and pro-nounced

"look me in the eye and say Oh Yeah I'm ready Bruce and then you will be.."

"But what if I simply don't want to?"

"Of course you don't want to, but this here is my dream crisis and you are player one, so you better must follow the script. We are in a contract now drawn up in humiliation-oooh yeah!"

and a plume of smoke issued from her rosy lips and haloed Ralf

"if you say so.."

"Not just me, but my dream crisis agrees with me," smug Bruce smile.

## **THE METEORS THAT BOUNCE**

before he met Enkidu, Gilgamesh dreamt of a giant rock that fell from the sky. He tried to lift the rock, but it would not budge. ding ding.

and the epic kid asked his mom Ninsun who was a god,

"Ma- what do I do?"

and she said, "Keep your hands to yourself Bozo."

if it is fight night and we are unable to respond

are we still responsible?

and Bruce blew a cloud of smoke that wrapped around Ralf

and she slapped him on the butt like her property, as you might tell a horse to giddy up and Ralf felt his body come to life

## **REWIND**

## YEARS BACK

Ralf had a sister named Gertie- she was Daddy's Favorite - a very special Girl with enormous potential and Ralf lived in her shadow- Ralfi was always known as Gertie's brother- everything he did was measured against Gertie

until she lost her mind

unexpected events destroyed Gertie and from that moment on she never left the house- watching sitcoms about families where everything is resolved in just about 30 minutes

now Gertie could neither sit nor stand- she hovered

- drinking soda and smoking menthol cigarettes, she believed in the color green.

"Family is everything," pronounced Gertie and Ralf believed her

Years earlier Gertie fell for a famous wrestler named Vera Divina. Vera arrived in town for a wrestling convention- Vera was a valedictorian, a linguist, a botanist and also a wrestling dynamo with amazing arms and legs that flashed like sharks underwater. She took apart everyone in the ring. Gertie was infatuated and went to Vera's dressing room for an autograph and then got a whole lot more. Ding Ding. There was a scandal and Vera escaped in a minivan. Gertie dropped out of high school and never recovered.

"Wrestling is fake," she pronounced, "but family is real."

and Ralf woke up from this dream so vivid it shook him.

# FROM THE ARCHIVES OF AN OPERA

*by* **OUAIL TOUATI**

In spite of its mystery, the local Algerian opera, “L’Opera d’Alger,” holds the artistic views and expressions of many Algerians. From the Mediterranean to the lovely Saharan desert, except in the hot summer, of course.

Marcel Pelletier, a French reporter sent by a French magazine, to write a report on l’opera d’Alger and how well it is culturally preserved. A brief summary of its most fortune generating projects such as music compositions, ballets, and exclusive plays written by the people of Algeria.

On the other hand, Marcel had no interest in their music compositions. Nor their productions, which at the time included famous acts such as “The Martyrs”, an adored oratorio by the masses. But Marcel wasn’t interested in their narrative struggles.

Inside the press lounges, Alaric Fournier, an Algerian born Frenchman and the editor of the narratives that took place in L’Opera d’Alger. In its intriguing, beautiful burgundy walls and its Mediterranean design. The sunlight dissolved into a glowing mist as it filtered through the skylight. Alaric, seated right in front of the viciously enthusiastic Marcel.

He began with simple questions, to ease into what he liked to know, and to ask the questions of which the policy of his job required. After addressing them, “What about the archives of L’opera d’Alger?” He asked. Marcel wasn’t interested in the works that made it to the theater. In contrast, he sought to understand the rejected ones. There had to be multiple of them. “There are always opposing sides when more than one set of eyes are present.” He thought.

“From what I understand, you are the editor.” Inquired Marcel.

“The editor? No. I am an editor, not the editor. The chief editor would be Gaspard.” Returned Alaric.

“But you’ve edited productions that didn’t quite make it to the big stage, correct?” “Well, of course, but I am not the final say so. That also would be Gaspard.”

Though Alaric describes himself merely as an editor, it was obvious that the man was humble. He was the brain of the opera house when an interview was about to take place. He articulated his words with a captivating tone; he was made for being a frontman.

“Alaric, what is it that you consider as not good enough, perhaps unworthy of publishing?” Marcel inquired.

### The Mailmen

I stayed in Algeria around a week. As a writer, of course. Was it very rewarding? Well, who am I to say so? I had a few topics off the top of my head, such as women, the cultural and rural places in the countryside, and the Mexican-looking slums of The Casbah. I arrived in Algiers with a head full of ideas, but the spotlight here seemed to shine differently. Some people would say it defies physics. But there are stories here, perhaps too many of them.

Malik was a forty-year-old man who lived somewhere in Algiers. I never got the chance to ask. You may be wondering, what’s so interesting about a middle-aged man? But he wasn’t a regular cigarette in hand, frown-wearing man like it’s a piece of jewelry. They called him “The Mailmen,” which was such an inconvenient choice of names.

Around a year ago, before he acquired the name “The Mailmen,” Malik wasn’t the employee on which bosses and managers relied. However, nobody seemed to fire him. Some say that the manager of whatever mailing company (one that I couldn’t mention by name) he worked for was his late uncle, and that made things easier for Malik. But that privilege was soon to be eliminated. His uncle passed away and was to be replaced by a new young man. What luck to have, Mr. Mailmen!

Up to this point, Malik never understood what it’s like to struggle for a position such as this. He skipped a lot of hours and even entire days. Of course, it was all paid. He used to throw the paper so far away from the front porch that it

couldn't be seen. Thus, most of the residents didn't even notice their papers. There were a few complaints, but his uncle used to respond with, "well, you know, it's the wind; it moves things. It happens, especially with paper." Not exactly those words, but that was what I had in my notes.

Despite that, things had changed now that a young manager sat on the leading chair. He was young, he was new, and most importantly, he was excited. The first meeting he hosted, which was to announce his position as their new leader, went well. The second one, however, he took off that warm and friendly smile on his face. The sparkle in his eyes faded like the sun in the evening, except there was no sunset. It was more like a quick solar eclipse. The first thing he announced was:

"I understand some of you have been working here for years. I wouldn't be surprised if this was your second home. I'm sure there is a lot of love in this crowded building. The cleaners, the smiles on the receptionists' faces, the reviews of which we've been getting. The amazing mailmen we have in the delivery department, which never seem to do their damn job! This place is a shithole! And I'll take it, I'll shape it, and I'll make it better, and we all do, don't we?"

A few people murmured. They were too clueless to give an answer.

"Well then, I want to see every man that lost his full head of hair to get lost with it!"

Their laughs at the supposed-to-be joke soon came to an end, when he started handing them out contracts of which they were obliged to sign. It was to make sure that none of the bald men take any sort of severance pay with them due to their over-the-counter poor performance. He then took the signed paper, which was all just a show. He had already fired them. The paper signing was nothing more than provocation, and there was no severance package policy. There hadn't been since this place was built.

Malik, however, had a full set of hair. He was too much of a dimwit, so his follicles remained active in his stress-free head. He was lucky to maintain his position. But now, he had to put in the effort, and he did. Malik started working like a maniac. The idea of him losing his job didn't suit him. He was

almost sick, thinking about how others would see him after losing his job. He never admired the people surrounding him, such as neighbors or regulars, who walked the city streets, but he still felt afraid of having to walk the streets in shame, while everyone stared at him.

This time, Malik had a plan. He reflected, wandered, and searched within himself, which didn't take him much time. Now, he had an idea! The only flaw he found in his performance was his lack of good aim, which is why there were complaints.

“They just didn't see it,” he thought. Now the new mailman was ready to step up! The best mailman Algiers will ever bestow their eyes upon!

The young manager had ordered the workers in the old green and white uniform to go ahead and change into these fresh new blue and white ones. The manager felt like changing everything to the opposite of what it was, even if it simply was colors, a decision that was neither good nor bad to the workers. They all did as they were told. The mail delivery men had on a full light blue one. The new uniform was designed to be noticeable in public, so subscribers could recognize the workers quickly and catch a glimpse of their faces in case a complaint needed to be filed. The manager made sure to explain it. After hearing that, the mail delivery men widened their eyes in shock. Was it a ghost they saw? No, it was the terror of having to live up to what they signed up for.

Malik, however, took the manager's idea as guidance. He turned it into a chance to prove himself. He pledged that he would now hand each paper to each subscriber assigned to him, so they could get a very close look. Maybe instead of filing complaints, they would give him a good review. What an idea, he thought to himself.

He put on the up-to-date uniform. A little too baggy, but it fit nonetheless. A plan in mind, he immediately began work, going around on his weary bike and handing out each paper.

The first few days were exciting. The residents of the assigned streets he was responsible for felt happy about his plan, and the smiles he received kept him motivated. It was around this time, when the people gave him a name, “The Mailmen,” which, to my understanding, was about the simultaneity of his

work, how he managed to deliver such a number of papers around the same time, while cycling on an old bike. Hence, the nickname, insinuating that he was not only one mailman, but multiple of them.

A few days later, after receiving his new nickname, the townsfolk began to recognize him, a little wave, here and there, whenever he was cycling through the old neighborhoods. Some people thought he overworked himself. They thought he wasn't the brightest, to be putting in this much work for such little pay. But the concept of performance and reward was unfamiliar to him. As long as there was a number in his check, all was well. He never spoke to any of the waving people. He went past them with a little smile, and that was about it. Until he got a wave from a certain somebody—someone who came out of an expensive car (expensive is the only word in my notes; Malik didn't understand anything about cars, so I was unable to get the brand or the model). He stopped right beside the man with the expensive car and stared him in the eyes without speaking a word. His eyes were wide, but he wasn't shocked. He had a look on his face of a curious dead man. The man with the expensive car saw those facial expressions before. He understood it.

“You've been delivering by hand, right? How exciting.” He chuckled, then tapped him on his shoulder and jumped back in his car, not leaving him any space or time to respond.

The following day, Malik went on with his work routine, delivering by hand. With around half of his daily work done, he approached a house and recognized the same expensive car coming out of its garage. He cycled as fast as he could to get to this man with the expensive car to hand him his paper, but the man kept on driving fast. Malik decided to follow him on a bike, while the man drove in a car; again, not very bright, but he kept following. An hour later, cycling through the narrow streets trying to find a shortcut, he lost him, then found him, then lost him again until he eventually gave up. He then realized how much time this decision cost him, a whole hour. He passed many houses he needed to deliver to and was noticed by many of them, around a dozen of unsatisfied customers. But his luck struck again. Only one complaint reached their email.

Malik, however, kept speaking of this man who waved at him. He told his co-workers about how much effort he was putting in. He mentioned he even spent an hour looking for a special customer. When asked how special, he told them about the expensive car. The other co-workers weren't as dumb. They noticed that the morning hour was a crucial part of the daily routine of a mailman. They questioned the waiting time the others had to endure. It can't be right, they thought. Soon they came to forget this topic since it wasn't a problem of theirs, and whenever they remembered what Malik had done, they laughed at him.

“One complaint is as bad as a thousand, you know that, right?” Said the manager.

“I know, but I was late because I wanted to make sure I handed that man his paper before he thought I was late.”

“The man with the expensive car.” “Yes, that man,” said Malik.

“Well, from what I heard, a dozen didn't get their morning papers, which means it disturbed their morning routine, which also means that it disturbed the magazine's reputation. This impression of unreliability only reflects back at the magazine,” the manager faced Malik with an intimidating gloomy look.

“Tell me again, why is this man more important than the rest of our subscribers?”

“I don't know. I guess I just saw him first, you know?” Malik was taken aback by such a question to which he could not generate a logical answer.

“You followed him for an hour. You were on a bike and did you say he was in an expensive car?”

“Yes! He was in an expensive car. It was fast. That's why I couldn't get to him.” The manager rested his head on his hands as he took a deep breath.

“Get out,” trying to speak as quietly as possible. Malik said nothing.

“Do you want me to drag you out?” The manager spoke in a disappointed tone, and Malik still said nothing.

“I’d rather not boot you out. Get out! Now!” The manager hit the table, the room rattled.

Malik walked out, lit a cigarette, and wore his frown like a piece of jewelry.

The final question

After the reading, Marcel asked Alaric the reason behind the rejection of this piece. To which Alaric responded with, “Gaspard did not like it very much. He questioned if the events that took place in this piece had occurred in the real world, and if they did, they were perceived by the mind of an outsider.”

# OUROBOROS

*by* ADA  
PELONIA

I throw a canned soda in a trash bin and it spawns into groups of four, then eight, then twelve, and then my mind whirls from the mushrooming cans of soda strewn on the street. My tingling fingers spur racing heartbeats. This is a heart attack! Call the ambulance! It's a stroke! My arms are numb, and I feel my face askew. Recall the symptoms: raise your hands—yes, in this street, are you even listening! Alright, now smile. Is the other side of your lips droopy? No. Can you spell your name backward. Yes. So, it isn't a stroke. Or is it? No. What is it then? Think. Come on, think! But I'm thinking! Five blooming palm trees, four bumps of mosquito bites on my elbow, three honks—the soda cans are still popping like pregnant frogs spewing tadpoles, and waves of sodas are now in view. My throat constricts, pinprick needles poking like tiny stingers. Please, calm down. My sister tugs the hem of my shirt, the back of her palm wiping beads of sweat trickling down my temples. Please, calm down. I'm calm! It's these goddamn cans! I have no color, my lips are blue. I can't breathe. It's asphyxiation! Get the EpiPen! It's not an allergic reaction. I'm not allergic to anything. Or am I? Please, calm down. My sister shakes me, and I feel a pinch on my arm. The cans tumble out of view. A nurse pops beside her. Please, calm down. But I'm calm. I'm so calm I haven't said a single word.

# SYNCHRONISM

by ANTHONY DEGREGORIO

At an arts and crafts fair by the library in Camden, Maine, I encounter a woman today who looks exactly like—*my cousin's, daughter, maybe?* Only she, this woman, is about 30 years older, 30 pounds lighter (perhaps she's ill?), and holds an expression deeply absent from the world around us here. It is the library used in the movie, "In the Bedroom." You can still see Sissy Spacek, arms raised conducting the choir of young girls along scales no longer fixed with unblemished beauty and innocence. Grief tangles in the black staff, its dry net of lines and spaces for the music she follows a bitter harmony of loss and youth, darkening the scene in the candlelit dusk before the harbor.

I pause when my eyes catch the sun off a steel silver pole holding up a shivering tent over paintings by local artists, a slash tearing raggedly up the canvas as if in slow motion. One of the portraits is someone so familiar ... *decades ago, 30 years or so* ... the time I washed floors at a state hospital in New England, popping sweaty pills I'd find stashed in the pockets of sleeping patients, sometimes corpses. Or maybe the colorful capsules and tablets would be mush, soaped in the bubbly effervescence created with each exhausted push and pull of the handle I could muster, tangled in the web of my grungy mop. Its grey strings rinsed and wrung out repeatedly, weighted, permanently saturated with the sour bile and stench of disillusion that regularly made its way up through raw throats and out of medication-dry mouths.

Their cat-rough tongues scratched along my hands and arms, their lips sucking my sweat of 30 plus hours without sleep or shower when I'd pass them spread-eagle on the floor or against the wall. Waiting. Posed. The hairs on my skin startled at first from their grooming me, rising upon the initial sandpaper touch in disgust, then pasted down with grey gobs of drool. Others roamed hunched, licking the leaded humidity, the spectral vapor of patients and staff, former and current, off olive paint on cinder block walls. Inhaling the marrow of the dead and dying trapped within those walls. Their scraped faces ruddied the concrete and wet my own face and palms in a warm red

mucus-thickened ink to make fingerprints like I had earlier that week. In town, before arriving there. The hot flesh of hands spread, from thumb to pinky upon the walls and bodies touched, measuring grade school palm prints to graveside footprints, past to future. The shallow cast of small hands pressed into cement drying into a darkness always spreading across a colorfully chalked sidewalk, shading a green hallway graffitied in waste. Something is set, holds fast: a first name etched in block letters, forgotten, revisited; the printer's fingers stretch and wrinkle across the years' quiet disappearance.

Everyone was wearing matching tops and bottoms, loosely hung sacks. Just like the faded beige scrubs they gave me that horribly strange day she didn't move anymore, her whole body a screaming inflammation. The drab uniform a weary coarse material, an irritant sticking to febrile skin. I floated through the heavy front doors, held up by two men helping me walk, pulling up on my leather belt with silver links dangling, once again entering the place I'd never leave. In the bathroom, black and white tiles set a filthy checkerboard of polar extremes. Absolutes. As rock solid beneath pacing feet pounding the floor hard with each step in a mad march, or against the forehead in a face-first free fall, as they were lifelessly cold, sending a chill penetrating the entire body like a curving silver current cutting through struggling unwilling flesh.

The wall length mirror before a row of half a dozen gray stalls, beneath the white hot brightness of florescent lights humming overhead, was sluggish, depending on what meds were consumed the day of viewing oneself and awaiting a verdict, too often rendered in phantom flashes. It was a silver lake streaked with saliva, its mercurial depths resistant to clear comprehension. The story in the reflection ranged wildly from horror to heaven, from hell to ultimate contentment, peace. Staring into it forever, through its cold surface until interrupted by a patient ready to evacuate, or vomit, or issue an extremely dark, alien-smelling urine, only half of which made it into porcelain, was the entertainment or torture. Sometimes staff members entered and merely leaned against the walls massaging keys, or fat cartoon character pens with rainbow-colored feather puffs of hair, hanging low from lanyards around their necks. Tempting pendulums. Observing, half smiling, smirking. How could you tell what they were thinking? Planning? When they would jump into precisely chaotic action? When they would employ their

tactics? (A strategy most assuredly designed in secret, we surmised. To douse the smoldering lives standing at slouching attention into a mush of pale wet ash. You could see residue on the mirror, sniff its burnt scent.) It was like watching a movie in a theater whose lights were turned up rather than lowered at the start of a film.

All night I spread a green path toward a locked door, only to rinse it away retracing my steps back to the unit, following the crying and yelling for direction through the darkness of 20 watt night shift lighting. The floor above is quiet, a cool storage locker of *terminals* committed decades ago in the absence of their adolescence. Their discordant voices long cut, muted with the years' dull scalpel. Personal chords once naturally transposed softly inside them no longer vibrated. Internal strings of thought, reason, pitch dangled like slashed wire void of electrical current.

A face in a tempered window, staring out over endless frosted acres spanning the years.

Beginning and ending paused.

On an empty platform before a quiet train station waiting room.

*Its windows sealed breathless with plywood nailed against sunlight and moon glow.*

Crackling in the background through an old cheap transistor radio-tape recorder the size of a large bar of soap, fading in and out, The Doors' driving "Break On Through (To The Other Side)" distorted the thick overheated air.

*... an island in your arms*

*Country in your eyes*

...

*Break on through to the other side*

*Break on through to the other side*

...

*...week to week*

*Day to day, hour to hour*

...

The words scattered about the rooms, throughout the building, like displaced mice. Disembodied voices ricocheted off the walls in a frenzied loop.

A dark private snowfall mounted upon the linoleum floors; drifts engulfed the bedbound in nightmares and vertiginous rapture ...

\* \* \*

... the woman in the portrait is a nurse she is the patient she is a stranger she is a lover waiting all nights forever posed by unseen hands weightless before an indistinct background leaning into a soft corner of quivering invisible walls her catatonic eyes on the canvas a textured comfort looking beyond the painting's spreading flat landscape. Inviting me back into the framed scene I'd left just moments before.

# FALLING DOWNWARDS

by ANGELA TOWNSEND

The time change never bothered me before. Fall Back made everything maple, with one languid morning for our trouble. Spring Forward elbowed me an excuse to go to bed early, followed by a day that shone past dinner.

But now that I'm falling forward at the speed of fun, I repudiate this dastardly Daylight Savings. I will open my own community credit union, thank you, and I will invest in golden hours without assistance.

I did not always feel this way. Who does?

Some late-spring days, we don't know where to bank time. The background Hertz hums and humbles us with baseline boredom. We are creative as mealworms. We invent errands to fold the day into a smaller square. We iron our underpants. We feel as jaunty as Jabba the Hutt.

This has nothing to do with busyness. Grueling work weeks may lead to unflavored-oatmeal weekends, haggard but hyperventilating for flow. When we find the banks as dry as burlap, there's little we can do to save the salamanders as they sigh.

I would have welcomed Spring Forward on such days. But now I am falling forward. I did not expect this.

When the water was low, I peeled the last salamanders from the dust and dropped them in blue Ball jars. There were only a few inches sloshing, but it might keep them breathing for a time. Why was there so much time?

When my flow was faint, I guarded it with trembling. Would the cavalry come this week, the wrinkled wagon of words? Would I come through with some glimpse of light, some bran muffin for the masses?

It always felt like a *Deus ex machina* moment when the first flame caught. I sang *glory hallelujahs* as the last embers lent an exclamation point. Tomorrow, the world had to be remade again.

I extracted water by the eyedropper. I refused ridiculous suggestions, such as “give the salamanders some clover” or “raise the water level with apple juice” or — what is wrong with you? — “take the salamanders out to play with them.”

Until the salamanders made demands.

They demanded I filter expectations out of the Ball jar. Those contaminants were poisoning the water. They were wrapping my words in peaky preciousness, a genre favored only by the devil on my shoulder, who is barely literate and smells quite foul.

They demanded I provide wildflowers. Sure, they would suck up some water. Sure, there might be unanticipated side effects. Certainly, anti-anxiety medication can tell your body jokes that no one finds funny except the angel on your shoulder, who is rather brilliant and smells like gardenias.

They demanded that I go on at least one date with Lexapro.

They conscripted my kin. “Your *magna mater* is worried about your magma. Your ancestors are trying to bend those gritted teeth back into the smile they gave you.”

What’s the worst that could happen?

I could lose the power, stored too close to the pain.

Daily dread could glub down the drain with my manic magic. I foresaw creative collapse and writerly death. Decades of longing for a lost half-life.

It was a radioactive idea.

Funny, the things we think we know at the atomic level. I was convinced that fear was the price I had to pay for ecstasy. I guarded my symphonic hypomania and staggering speed. No one could keep up with me, not even me, but what would happen if I finally got caught?

I feared losing my job, my place, my Ball jars. I feared that fighting fear would give the devil his win. What then? I would still be dread-bombed, but without the lean golden hours that made lesser hours livable.

I had much to learn. I had much to surrender. It was that word — “surrender” — that ended the end and began the beginning.

This experiment would be an act of surrender to the Writer who gives and takes away words and flow and salamanders and clover and mothers and mercy and mania.

This experiment would end my friendship with Daylight Savings Time.

That was not my hypothesis. I watched with worry as dread, sulfur-yellow and thick as chowder, circled the drain. There were chunks in it. Was that my zest? The joy of wordplay? The hours that felt like kiss-instants?

Days passed. I wrote. I wrote! I wrote the usual. I wrote the unusual. I wanted to write more.

I wanted to write more, and I did write more. I wrote bayous of dreck. Salamanders laughed on the levees. The dreck did not destroy me. I wrote more. I wanted to write more, and I did write more.

The more I wrote, the more I wrote.

I could write about anything. I could write into villages where people gave free babka. I could write my day into something I could offer. I could write grey into pink, wounds into stitches, questions into kinder questions, dread into dumplings that might feed somebody.

I could jubilate in the fact that there is a town called Manunka Chunk, or in the baying of walruses, or in the buoyant eyebrows of my friends, or in the singing man who vacuums the condo hallway.

I could tear off hunks of cake without fear that less cake would remain.

What I could not do was stop.

What I could not do was unsee hope, bursting dams I'd thought were my bones, powering villages I'd thought were doomed to dusk.

What I could not do was love life less, love hours less, love the day any less than utterly.

I am falling forward into magic, manic mud, where all the salamanders survive.  
I am doing more than surviving. I am singing more than humming.  
I am writing more than ever. I am writing more than time permits. The world  
is being remade, *Deus ex machina*, *Deus ex surrender*, *Deus ex Angela*.

# ASPARAGUS DISORDER

*by* E.H. JACOBS

I was reading over the transcript of a psychological report I had dictated and was amused by the diagnosis the transcriptionist had rendered to my patient: Asparagus Disorder. I had no idea if the patient - a young man who exhibited painful social awkwardness and repetitive and ritualistic behaviors – had an unusual, obsessive fondness for or aversion to a certain green vegetable favored by foodies but, in my professional opinion, he did have a condition that was then known as “Asperger’s Disorder.” This was a term that described individuals at the higher-functioning end of autism. The misunderstanding on the part of the transcriptionist (or, perhaps, my miscommunication through a failure of articulation) was quickly remedied before it was sent out into the world.

Unfortunately, individuals with autism are easily misunderstood, and not only on paper, where the error can be laughed at, and harm can be averted. Add to this that, as children, they are at the mercy of their uncomprehending peers, and you have a recipe for a lot of hurt borne on those misunderstandings.

Robert was in my Honors Social Studies class in high school. He was an affable, smart young man, with a broad, almost cartoon-like smile erupting readily from a wide mouth. His jaw almost seemed suspended on wires as it moved up and down when he laughed. He had a staccato way of speaking with a habit of repeating the beginning sounds of words, like he was pushing them out faster than he could think them -- something between a stammer and a stutter, but not quite either. He was friendly to everyone, and he was the type of kid with whom you could discuss classwork and current events in an intelligent, if concrete, manner, but with whom you would never think of discussing girls or whom you would never invite to your house just to hang out. He was nice, but...different. And being different, unfortunately, was not embedded with much social promise.

In that Social Studies class, the teacher had us elect a class president whose role it was to stand in the front and start each class off with a review of current events and class announcements. The class almost unanimously elected Robert, because we wanted to enjoy the silent amusement of watching and listening to his odd mannerisms. We were all laughing inside and smiling on the outside and, I like to believe, Robert was pleased and encouraged by the smiles and oblivious to the hidden laughter at his expense. I remember Robert going through his morning announcements and myself chuckling inside – an attempt to squeeze one more fleeting, uplifting spark of levity from the tedium of a high school day. Now, a person might read this and think that this was a cheap way for me and my peers to feel superior, but I don't think that was true (although I am not so infused with my own feelings of superiority that I wouldn't be open to considering a cogent argument to the contrary). I was sufficiently satisfied with my interests, my social circle and my academic achievements not to need any further bolstering of my self-worth, and sufficiently cognizant of my own family's relatively low socio-economic status to ensure a certain healthy degree of humility in who I thought I was.

It was after embarking on a career as a clinical psychologist and meeting, evaluating and treating individuals with higher functioning autism that I came to look back on that class with Robert. The work I do has grown in me a deeply-felt fondness and respect for these individuals who face the challenges that I believe Robert faced and probably still faces in life. And now that I have decades of experience in identifying people with these traits, I believe that I count a number of them among my friends, acquaintances and colleagues, although most do not know that I "know" and may or may not know themselves. That is immaterial. What is important is that these individuals are able to form connections with others, have enduring relationships that nurture and support them and are embraced by friends and family in their individualities, including their gifts and their quirks, which is nothing less than we all deserve.

In retrospect, Robert had a challenging road ahead of him, a road maybe not smoothed over much by the group of knuckleheads in his Honors Social Studies class. But, maybe, in our own odd way, we did make him feel important and maybe we were good, polite and well-bred enough to hide how different

we felt he was. Maybe it was a good experience for him. Or, maybe, he was hurt by our actions in ways he might or might not have been aware of. I have no idea which one was true. But I also figure that he might not have had many real friends, and that must have made for a painful adolescence.

My speculations can have me running around in mental circles chasing the tail of my imaginings. The real “comedy” here is not Robert’s deficit in social understanding, but our own – the bungling by those of us who supposedly had “normal” social skills. What we thought was comical was sad. What we told ourselves was amusing was insensitive at best. What we intended as harmless amusement was social exclusion. What we thought was his obliviousness was actually ours.

I can only hope that Robert was blessed with a loving, supportive, empathic and wise family, and that, as he traveled his path, and as he travels still, he met with an abundance of understanding and encouragement, as well as, simply, patience and calm, from teachers, mentors, colleagues, supervisors, supervisees and professionals, along with clerks in stores, waiters in restaurants, ushers in theaters and attendants at gas stations -- that these people, in ways large and small, formed for him a village that helped him navigate a sometimes treacherous, sometimes wonderful world with the confidence and fulfillment that he deserved. Whether or not he had a thing for asparagus.

# HOW TO NOT BE INSTITUTIONALIZED

*by* LY FAULK

— a golden shovel sestina after Fiona Apple  
I know enough (now) what not to say and  
I know enough (now) how to not be institutionalized and I  
know that what you have to do is describe what you went  
through without sounding like you're crazy.  
You have to explain that you're having those thoughts again  
without it seeming like committing suicide was your plan for today.  
If you go too far, you'll find yourself locked up today,  
when all you wanted was some Xanax and  
maybe an antidepressant. You've tried before, why not again?  
I've been there, with a paper gown stuck to my butt while I  
waited for some doctor to come and pronounce me crazy  
enough to get some pills and be on my way. I've also went  
  
to get my pills and ended up locked up, went  
to the state-run facility explaining that I can't be locked up today,  
I have cats. I'm not even all that crazy,  
not like my roommate who isn't sure I'm real, and  
not like the man who throws chairs when he's angry and I  
don't even want to die that much, don't make me go again,  
please. Fear of being made to go back again  
keeps me from being honest. I've went  
to therapy so many times that I  
feel like it no longer works. I know the tricks. Today  
is a new day. Focus on the here and now. And  
whatever you do, remember that you are not crazy.  
It's normal to go a little bit crazy  
from time to time. You're unemployed again,  
never able to hold a job for long and  
it's been so long since you've left the house, even went  
to the grocery store. You tell yourself today  
but you don't go, eating leftover delivery pizza over the sink. I  
chide myself for gaining weight, then I  
chide myself for being fatphobic. I chide myself for even saying crazy

when it's kind of ableist but today  
I cut myself some slack since once again,  
maybe I do that too much. Maybe that's how I went  
crazy in the first place and  
all of this is to say that today I will be gentle with myself  
like I learned in therapy and if I find myself going crazy,  
climbing the padded walls again, I won't have to wonder where I went.

# CENDRILLON HURLS HER LAST BEAN AT THE Y

*by* LINDA ANN  
STRANG

Any woman ought to be wood-wise enough not  
to go running through the forests at night,  
without even a godmother, taking a stab

at being a prince. After all, there are wolves,  
diminished men (with idiot nicknames and loads  
of laundry, whistling), ugly hats. But what Google

map, pinless sister, to believe in when home is hell.  
You anticipated firebirds – at least a fairy of lilac  
with a Subaru drawn by dragons. At very least

a cat with a grin and wisecracks, a feather  
in his cap, the ear of the king – inviting tea.  
How to resist going off into the forest deep

when there's slapping, tell tales, yelling? You fancied  
you'd land at the pearly palace, prinking – Snow  
White did – waving a hanky at the headless, gargling

diamonds, the goose uncooked. A ball. Your steps  
wearing iron boots – ducked in the pond, sucking  
on frogs, or bloody with envy in a courtyard tub.

But rub-a-dub-dub your eyes and you're in a dining hall  
with a wino, sauerkraut, all rings going green. Stars  
popping above a Christmas tree, all matches burning out.

# TREADING WATER

*by* ZOE DAVIS

This well is deep and I have grown up  
its stucco walls  
neck stretched to sunlight  
hands a dagger-leafed plant.

Lichen drips orison  
from weathered sockets  
toes curled  
teasing a soft-mossed mouth.

I am a scream  
a whimper  
a nourishing source of hope  
when I cannot crawl  
I am  
a sacrifice in brick  
when pain eclipses joy  
I sink  
sleek beneath rich blanket folds  
braid depths  
tread water  
until inevitability grips  
my shoulders  
stands  
shakes eggs from nesting skull  
the remains of me  
mulch  
sustaining  
two nebbish ghosts.  
The clank of the bucket.  
The prayer of the painless.

# THE APPROXIMATE DISTANCE OF HAUNTING

*by* ELIJAH WOODRUFF

The goose smoked a menthol cigarette in a seedy bar and watched his wife sway and swing to the rhythms of the jazz band behind her. He was in love with her, or more accurately, he was in love with her voice, or even more accurately, he was in love with the outer edges of her voice. The sound of her singing bubbled against his present and he ached to fall into it and never stumble out, but he had never managed to stay stuck. Though the goose would never tell her that unless he drank approximately twelve watered-down whiskey sours. Which he was doing. And when his lovely wife, the jazz singer, was finished, she went home with a different goose—it seems that she can't quite tell the difference between drunk geese—and left him there, among his empties, with his forehead feathers stuck to something sticky on the bar top. And after he'd been roused from his slumber by hands set on closing, and paid his crazy expensive tab, he flew home just to sit on the far curb and watch, through veiled curtains, the flickering flare of his wife's cigarette.

# ON BIPOLARITY

*by* MCKENZIE WOOD

It bangs on the walls  
like a tempered child.

Rattles my teeth and  
sings the war songs  
of the day.

It dies on my lips.

it swells in my breast like  
a held breath, an overextended  
cry for mercy.

The lion prowls and prowls in  
its cage behind dark eyes  
waiting for claws, for teeth, for  
a reason.

# PUDDLE

*by* PURBASHA ROY

In this poem I am the sidewalk puddle. A  
long rain gave me this geometryless body.  
A lamp that I reflect faintly has a pigeon  
cooing madly. The wind runs through me  
like fire through kerosene soaked jute. My  
frail body shivers shy perimeters  
in a storm. To my surprise I feel pleased.  
What metaphor can be written for a sudden  
joy that ought to be an offering of  
discomfort. Then suddenly a lack of warmth.  
Defeat on the 99th point of snakes and  
ladders. Mens' arrival to wipe off my framework.  
How they finish me drop-by-drop. Makes me think  
of the forest line near my childhood town. The way  
it was puckered by a blind folded civilization. Until  
all that is left of me: few orphan drops.

# MANIC/DEPRESSIVE

*by* D.W. BAKER

## Manic

## Depressive

brain bomb

brain tomb

fast lane

contemplate

five songs

dead weight

autoplayed

costume

gravitate

heavy moon

magnify

frame rate

pilot flame

joy delay

flashing lights

panic room

warning signs

starve house

rapid speech

crash car

credit lines

hidden debt

gasoline

trickle down

wild burn

carve skin

scorched earth

trial death

# THE GLARE OF THE HIGHWAY

by JAMES DIAZ



# A HARD PILL TO SWALLOW

*by* BETHANY CUTKOMP



MIRROR VIEW

by JULIANNA KUBIK



# CIRCUITRY

*by* MAUDIE BRYANT



# contributors



Antonio y Soledad Páez

Ellis Shuman

Ouail Touati

Harold Liminal

Ada Pelonia

Anthony DeGregorio

Angela Townsend

E.H. Jacobs

Ly Faulk

Linda Ann Strang

Zoe Davis

Elijah Woodruff

McKenzie Wood

Purbasha Roy

D.W. Baker

James Diaz

Bethany Cutkomp

Julianna Kubik

Maudie Bryant



Issue One, like a small scar, established Libre in the unregulated ecosphere of awake-and-ready literature, or, at least, it made a splash on X and gave me hope that its engine was strong enough for daily digital battle. I trot steadily through online embarrassment on a daily basis. As something newly-minted, quite volatile, and beneficently feeble in its purpose (at the time I was sketching out its skeleton with bright turquoise and thinking of girl saints), this sweet negligence shows in our early graphics and attempts at formatting poetry properly. As something new and funded by the tentative income of a small inheritance, the publication was hardly much at all save for a blog and inexperienced inbox. There was, however, a vision that rested heavily: it was pure and there was blue, big fonts, bigger stories, an idea—that, like a virgin—blushed at its possibility of existence. In the first act of Hamlet there's that scene about ghosts, and the reader's wondering whether this handsome young man is insane. The trust you've placed in his actions feels squandered. You get mad at Shakespeare for a second. The conceptual possibility that madness makes more sense in context when reading our monsters properly is something we all meet on the Hill at some point, either greet like neighbor or decide's a threat. The Libre ghost plays prominently in our framework, ensures meaning for what we do by messing things up. Maybe he gave me that vision, then decided to watch. The flat-brokenness of clinical depression is a desperate creature, feels like dying. Replace that dead red for a blue you'll find on postcards. Libre, for several months, was between the palm trees, taking moments for cigarette breaks, offering the unimportant embrace of friendship to its new followers. These 19 contributors were the light switch. The magazine's premise wasn't capable of recognizing itself without an issue of its own. Despite being so young, I'm glad we did it. The issue's lack of theme gave the authors and artists enough creative string to brave the kinetics of brain-based writing without any strict scaffolding, no rules, just write about it and we'll see, we'll see what they think.