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VOLUME 44 NUMBER 2

## Features

### RIFFS ON RIFFS

POETRY BY

HAYDEN CARRUTH

PAINTINGS IN RESPONSE BY

HANANYA GOODMAN

The music is between the lines in poetry, and between the notes in jazz, – and this music – particular player to particular poet – is what the particular painter hears and puts to paper between strokes.

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### EYES WIDE OPEN

JANICE JOHNSON

I fix my eye on what I see: one eye narrowed yet eyes wide open. And so, my camera is my travelling companion, my best friend, through whom I open my heart, open my eyes, for it's only with the heart that one can capture the feelings attached to what you see.

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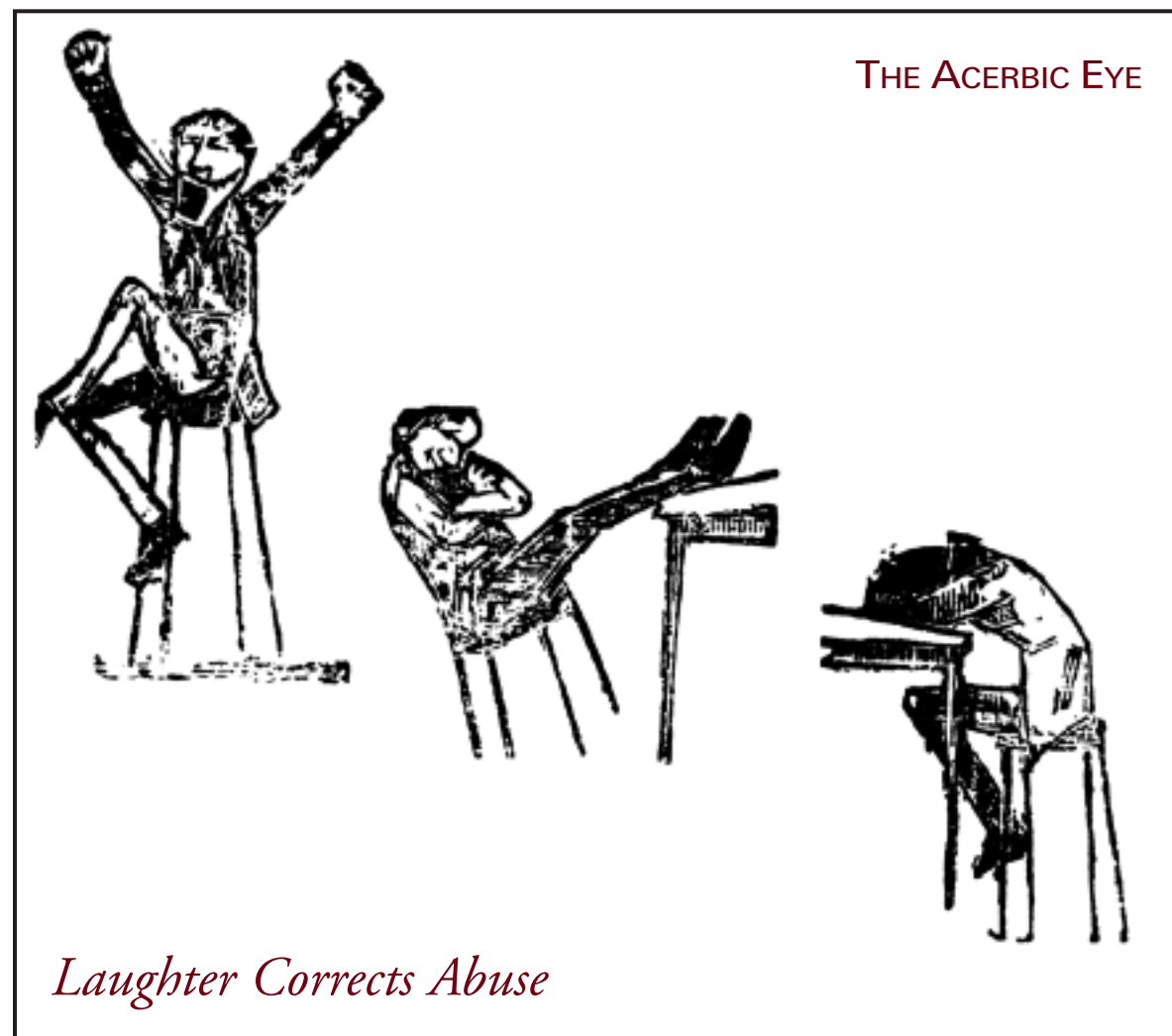
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Jean-Baptiste Côté (1834–1907) is remembered today as Quebec's finest woodcarver during the second half of the 19th century. As a youth in Quebec City, he served as an apprentice architect and carver. Jean-Baptiste specialized in wooden statues, religious relief scenes, figure heads for wooden ships, and even cigar store Indians. Many of his works became a valuable part of Canadian museum collections.

What is less known is that Côté was French-Canada's first cartoonist. In 1863, he began producing woodcuts of a satirical bent for a weekly, bilingual humour publication entitled *La Scie* or *The Saw*. The publication's motto was *Castigat ridendo mores* – Laughter corrects abuse. Relentless in attacks upon prominent Quebecers of the day, the publication was also highly critical of the concept of Canadian Confederation, often portraying the new country as a multi-headed monster. Côté personally thought it to be a threat to the French-Canadian way of life. He also portrayed local politicians, engaged in distributing liquor to potential voters, and raiding cemeteries to drag the dead to the polls. Eventually, Côté went too far in his portrayal of a Quebec civil servant's typical working day (above), asleep at his desk. The caricaturist was thrown in jail for his effort and the magazine's printing presses were destroyed by the authorities, ending its publication after only five short years.

Jean-Baptiste then returned to wood carving for the rest of his life. He died in Quebec City's Lower Town in 1907, where he had resided all of his life.

—Terry Mosher a.k.a. Aislin

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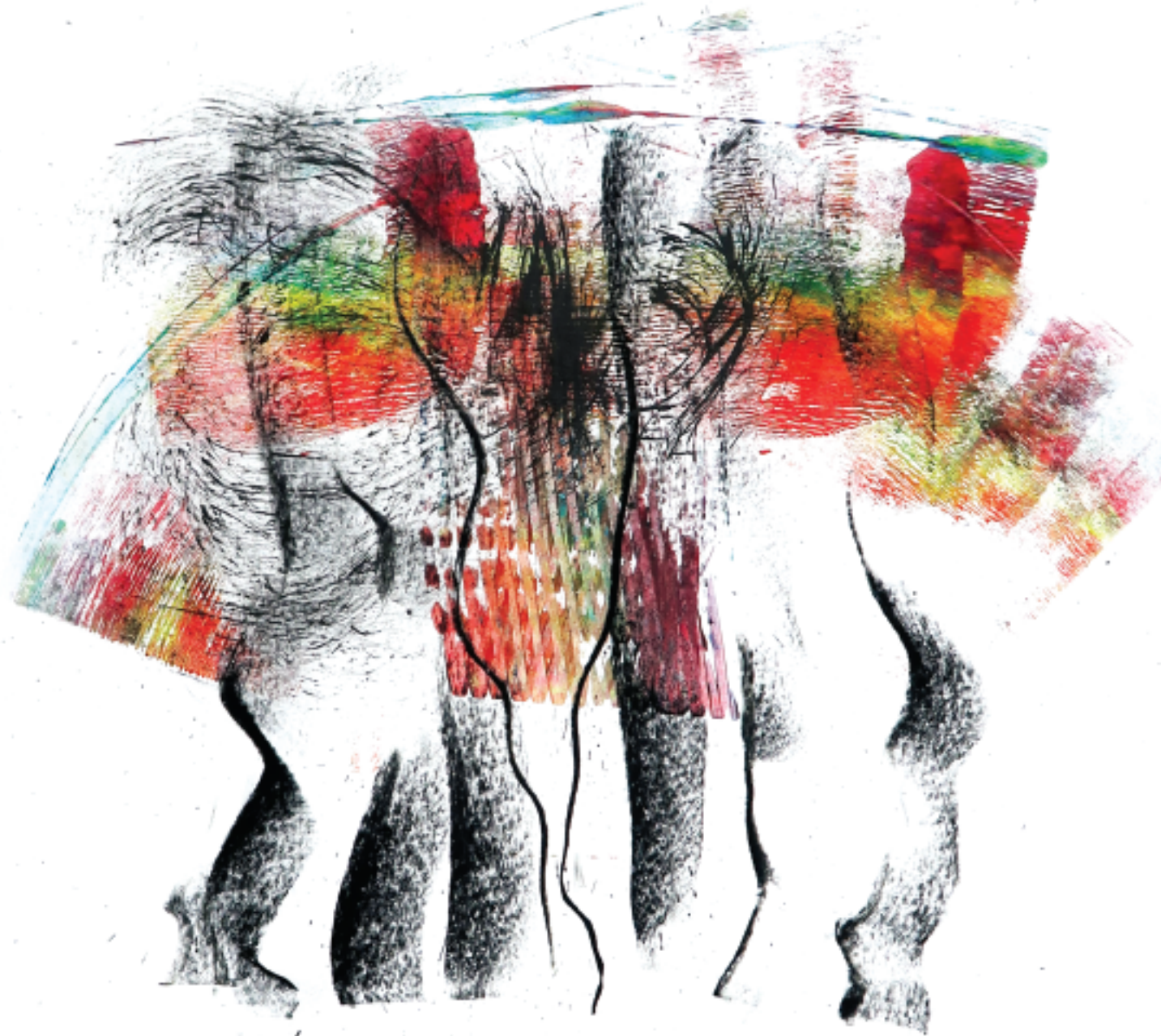
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# RIFFS ON RIFFS

*Poems by*  
HAYDEN CARRUTH

*Paintings in response by*  
HANANYA GOODMAN



## Word & Art

### Because I Am

*in memory of Sidney Bechet, 1897–1959*

Because I am a memorious old man  
I've been asked to write about you, Papa Sidney,  
Improvising in standard metre on a well-known  
Motif, as you did all those nights in Paris  
And the world. I remember once in Chicago  
On the Near North where you were playing with  
A white band, how you became disgusted  
And got up and sat in front next to the bandstand  
And ordered four ponies of brandy; and then  
You drank them one by one, and threw the empty  
Glasses at the trumpet player. Everyone laughed,  
Of course, but you were dead serious – sitting there  
With your fuzzy white head, in your rumpled navy  
Serge. When you lifted that brass soprano to your  
Lips and blew, you were superb, the best of all,  
The first and best, an *Iliad* to my ears.  
And always your proper Creole name was mis-  
Pronounced. Now you are lost in the bad shadows  
Of time past; you are a dark man in the darkness,  
Who knew us all in music. Out of the future  
I hear ten thousand saxophones mumbling  
In your riffs and textures, Papa Sidney. And when  
I stand up trembling in darkness to recite  
I see sparkling glass ponies come sailing at me  
Out of the reaches of the impermeable night.



### For Papa

So long ago that was called Jimmy Yancey,  
that played the piano blues, that like his eyes  
heavy-lidded searching the cocaine haze  
laconically drew as it were a necromancy  
from very ancient melody where no fancy  
thing was heard, but a lingering, falling phrase  
or a slow trill touched over the limping bass  
in reticence, in almost silence, the chancy

lines of the song held in informing purity,  
the bitterness of his love, the soul of *sonetto*,  
as once with him that was called Dante, for so –  
and only quietly so – might simple clarity  
flow in the antsy moan of the crowd, a tone  
of primordial sorrow, the deepest and so long gone.





“Sure,” said Benny Goodman,

“We rode out the depression on technique.” How gratifying, how rare,  
Such expressions of a proper modesty. Notice it was not said  
By T. Dorsey, who could not play a respectable “Honeysuckle Rose” on a kazoo,  
But by the man who turned the first jazz concert in Carnegie Hall  
Into an artistic event and put black musicians on the stand with white ones equally,  
The man who called himself Barefoot Jackson, or some such,  
In order to be a sideman with Mel Powell on a small label  
And made good music on “Blue Skies,” etc. He knew exactly who he was, no more, no less.  
It was rare and gratifying, as I’ve said. Do you remember the Incan priestling Xtlgg, who said,  
“O Lord Sun, we are probably not good enough to exalt thee,” and got himself  
Flung over the wall at Machu Picchu for his candour?  
I honour him for that, but I like him because his statement implies  
That if he had foreseen the outcome he might not have said it.  
But he did say it. *Candour seeks its own unforeseeable occasions.*  
Once in America in a dark time the existentialist flatfoot floogie stomped across the land  
Accompanied by a small floy floy. I think we shall not see their like in our people’s art again.



### Scrambled Eggs and Whiskey

Scrambled eggs and whiskey  
in the false-dawn light. Chicago,  
a sweet town, bleak, God knows,  
but sweet. Sometimes. And  
weren't we fine tonight?  
When Hank set up that limping  
treble roll behind me  
my horn just growled and I  
thought my heart would burst.  
And Brad M. pressing with the  
soft stick, and Joe-Anne  
singing low. Here we are now  
in the White Tower, leaning  
on one another, too tired  
to go home. But don't say a word,  
don't tell a soul, they wouldn't  
understand, they couldn't, never  
in a million years, how fine,  
how magnificent we were  
in that old club tonight.





### The Fantastic Names of Jazz

Zoot Sims, Joshua Redman,  
Billie Holiday, Pete Fountain,  
Fate Marable, Ivie Anderson,  
Meade Lux Lewis, Mezz Mezzrow,  
Manzie Johnson, Marcus Roberts,  
Omer Simeon, Miff Mole, Sister  
Rosetta Tharpe, Freddie Slack,  
Thelonious Monk, Charlie Teagarden,  
Max Roach, Paul Celestin, Muggsy  
Spanier, Boomie Richman, Panama  
Francis, Abdullah Ibrahim, Piano  
Red, Champion Jack Dupree,  
Cow Cow Davenport, Shirley Horn,  
Cedar Walton, Sweets Edison,  
Jaki Byard, John Heard, Joy Harjo,  
Pinetop Smith, Tricky Sam  
Nanton, Major Holley, Stuff Smith,  
Bix Beiderbecke, Bunny Berigan,  
Mr. Cleanhead Vinson, Ruby Braff,  
Cootie Williams, Cab Calloway,  
Lockjaw Davis, Chippie Hill,  
And of course Jelly Roll Morton.

All of Goodman's paintings are untitled, and were completed in 2021.  
Gouache, organic liquids (henna, coffee), soft pastel, India ink,  
on 50 x 70 cm 250 gram paper.



*from the novel*

# ESTATES LARGE AND SMALL

RAY  
ROBERTSON

Brick and mortar, horse and buggy, say hello to tomorrow today. But I'm down, I'm not out. Not yet, anyway. If readers won't come to the bookstore, then the bookstore will have to come to the readers. A virtual bookstore, with 15,000 or so more than virtual books, as well as full-on, full-time partnership with abe.com, the very sort of e-commerce marketplace that was one of several reasons why sales have steadily declined for more than a decade and that I'm in the position I'm in now. I miss having somewhere to go every day and people to talk to once in awhile, but, on the other hand, it's nice to not have to wear pants to work if you don't feel like it. Or a mask. You win some, you lose some, it's how you keep score that counts.

But even if head office and the warehouse share the same mailing address as your house, that doesn't mean you always get to do whatever you want. Until every one of those 15,000 books that used to fill the shelves of the Queen Street West bookstore I owned for 23 years is imputed and eventually put online, every Tuesday, Wednesday, and Friday means Benjamin, my nephew and sole employee, and having to be up and fully dressed by 11 a.m. It's difficult to inspire loyalty and dedication in your staff while attired in a housecoat and flip-flops.

And today there's someone else, too, Cameron, from something called Toronto West Social Media Solutions. The world, it seems, is increasingly populated with Benjamins and Camerons. At what point did parents come to believe that bestowing their children with three-syllable names increases their offspring's chances of being private-school worthy? My own childhood was full of Bobs and Bettys, Julies and Jims, names remarkable only for their ordinariness. Of course, I wouldn't trust a nature writer who never stepped outside, so my offspring-free opinions about contemporary child-rearing are likely equally suspect. Doesn't stop me from having them, though.

The only child in my life is my mother, and that's not cruel, that's the truth. Or maybe it's both. Either way, it's not my fault, just like it's not hers. Besides, it's not so bad. Oh, it's bad – retirement-home, borderline-dementia bad – but it could be worse. Much worse. Mum isn't Alzheimer's-losing it – doesn't forget any of the really important stuff, least of all the name of somebody she knew 60 years ago, and the rheumatoid arthritis in her hands and

feet and knees excepted, for an 81-year-old woman she's in shipshape physically – she's just losing it. And seems as if she's having a pretty good time doing so. Forty years ago, she'd just be called *dotty*. What we call things matters. Words matter. My mother is just dotty.

Another hour until the doorbell and Benjamin, and an hour after that the person from the social media company, but I can't complain, I've been my own boss for a long time, haven't had to endure chattering co-workers or team-building exercises or casual Fridays for just as long. The mass of men *wish* they led lives of quiet desperation. You meet someone and they ask you how you got into the used books business and you say something about always wanting to be a writer or an English professor and neither being in the cards and always loving books and it just making sense and that's all true, but it's not the truth. Not the entire truth. I like sleeping in and I don't enjoy chit-chat and I could never listen to someone else's music all day at work, so I had to open up my own store.

Not that every hour is my own until all of the books are online; I still need to periodically replenish the store's stock, the healthy red corpuscles of any respectable used book store, which is why I need widows. The wives of dead collectors are my bibliophilic blood supply. Not that there aren't women who are collectors themselves who die and leave behind a house full of suddenly superfluous books. There are – I've bought a few of their collections – but it's mostly men and they usually die before their wives and it's the widows I ordinarily deal with. Women, I've found, tend to be the better, more



knowledgeable readers; men, the more conspicuous collectors. The widows call me on the telephone and invite me into their homes and I spend two or three hours sorting through a lifetime of fervent, assiduous collecting before eventually making them a cash offer for their recently deceased dear one's lifelong labour of love. I don't buy textbooks, musical scores, or encyclopedias, and what I'm most interested in is literature (all genres, including criticism), history, philosophy, biography, and theology, and, no, I can't give you a rough idea of how much I think your collection is worth without first looking at in person. But I do buy entire estates, large and small.

Before any of that, though: a shit (hopefully), a shower and a shave (probably), breakfast (almost certainly). At 54 years old, you learn not to take anything for granted. Visit enough widows, you discover the same thing.

★ ★ ★

I used to be in a relationship – for nearly 10 years – but then I met Jerry Garcia's guitar and good weed. That's my theory, anyway. Debbie might have a different answer if you ask her, but you'd have to call long distance to get it. And she's a busy woman, be prepared to leave a message.

We liked being busy. It's probably why we lasted as long as we did. We liked to work hard and enjoyed what we did for a living and appreciated that the other one felt the same way about what they did. We even met because of work. Debbie was employed as a paralegal near Osgoode Hall, which wasn't too far of a walk to my store on Queen Street, and she came into the shop one day and said she had to buy a gift for the head of the law firm she worked for who'd decided to run for Parliament on the Conservative ticket. I succeeded in suppressing the desire to suggest *The Idiot*, and instead recommended an expensive first edition of Robert Penn Warren's excoriation of political power, *All the King's Men*. She'd seen the movie it was based on and got the joke and we shared a conspiratorial smile while I ran up her purchase,

which led to an afternoon cup of coffee and then to a late dinner and then to sharing the same bed.

We were born in the same year, but entering our late 40s and intimations of holy-shit-I'm-going-to-be-50-soon meant something very different for each of us. Debbie grew up in Northern Ontario, on the north shore of Lake Superior, and was always after me to visit where she was from and to sample its bucolic delights. I went once – her parents still lived up there – and it's sublimely beautiful, I get it, but when she took up hardcore hiking in the shadow of the Big 50, however, she was on her own. She never made me feel as if I wasn't welcome to join her and her growing circle of hiking buddies – just like she'd always encouraged me to emulate her daily hour-and-a-half workout at the gym or to join her whenever she'd run or walk or climb for one good cause or another – but driving several hours somewhere just to be able to spend several more hours slogging across Canadian shield while swatting away mosquitoes and keeping an eye out for bears isn't my idea of R&R. Sounds more like punishment than pleasure.

Around the same time, I began to feel that, staring down my own half century, I'd earned the occasional time-out from human interaction as well, and discovered an unexpectedly effective way of simultaneously shutting out the outside noise while turning up the volume inside. Turning it *way* up. Headphones and red wine and the right record album had always been a favoured means of washing away a busy day of words, words, words, whether buying, selling, or reading them, but marijuana took the cerebral cleansing of a full-bodied Chardonnay to a whole other level of psychic relief. In addition, it was as if I'd never really heard music before; or, I'd heard it, it was the same sounds, but it was like listening to them in stereo for the first time, each instrument clearly, magnificently audible in isolation as well as a participating piece of the greater musical whole. It was like learning a new language. And the best music to get the best value for your doobie was music made by Jerry Garcia.

Garcia's guitar tone, his instrumental DNA, was, like pot, a late-in-life revelation, was delicately, powerfully, swoop-and-soar sinewy and inimitably his, his ceaseless musical curiosity compelling him to eschew guitar solo clichés and squeeze out the full emotional range of almost every note he played. I'd listened to rock and blues and hard country most of my life, and could appreciate a tasteful, economical guitar or keyboard solo as much as the next person, but the prolonged exhibition of instrumental virtuosity had always been something you waited to be over with until you got back to the song and the words. But Garcia's guitar had a personality; Garcia's guitar *talked* – was alternately thoughtful, playful, melancholy, anguished, ethereal, obstinate, joyful, bewildered, blissful, and oftentimes all of these things over the course of the same 10- or 15-minute song. They couldn't be any shorter. It would be like asking Cezanne to paint a pond full of water lilies on the inside cover of a pack of matches.

Debbie thought I'd regressed to being a Grateful Dead-besotted teenage pothead. I thought she was mindlessly marching her life away. Who knows? Maybe we were both right.

You'd think, though, it was the kind of impasse that two people who cared about each other should have been able to overcome by listening to each other and jointly seeing the bigger picture and by working out a mutually satisfactory compromise. You'd think.

They say that if you could correct an author's weaknesses, you'd also eliminate their strengths. I could have been more understanding of her need to reconnect with her woodsy upbringing. I could have cut back on the weed and the Dead and bought some *Off!* and roughed it with her in the great outdoors once in a while. When she found a job in B.C. that would allow her access to mountains and ocean and miles and miles of unknown hiking trails, I could have packed up shop and come along. But it's hard not to be who you are.

As far as these things go, the breakup was amicable. She took the job and moved west, I bought

out her half of the house and had room for more books and music, and 3,000 miles between us meant a fresh start for us both. The saddest part is that I don't think we missed each other.

★ ★ ★

After we split, I'd work all day, eat whatever takeout I picked up on the way home, and get stoned and listen to the Dead before falling asleep in bed watching YouTube on my laptop. It's easy to get lost when you haven't got anywhere else to go.

When there wasn't any her and me any longer – only me – I realized I really didn't have anyone to talk to anymore. Life is mostly just a bunch of things that happen (or don't), but a good story makes up for it. Reality is just the rough draft, and a story needs not only a teller, but a listener. Not that I noticed much. Aided by just enough red wine and a great big fatty and one of Jerry's winding, probing, silky guitar solos circa, say, 1973 – sweet and sour satori with a wah-wah pedal thrown in to seal the deal – being able to actually experience what you'd previously only been able to read about in mystical poetry made up for not having somebody to share a pizza with or to sit beside at the movies. Warm oneness with the coldly indifferent universe; individual consciousness solemnly merged with a great big cosmic belly laugh; maybe not quite William Blake's world in a grain of sand, but certainly a decent-sized portion of that same shimmering world contained in a sustained E chord: in comparison, being by myself a lot didn't seem like such a big deal. Even when the world was in full-on COVID-19 lockdown, except for a chronic shortage of toilet paper and having to stand in line at the liquor store or at Loblaws, I can't say it made that much of a difference to my day-to-day life. It turned out I'd been practicing social distancing long before the government told us it was a good idea.

I didn't do much dating after Debbie and I broke up. Or any, actually. I wasn't celibate, but



what few next-mornings there were never turned into anything more. And then there weren't even any more next-mornings. Sometimes, yeah, I felt like even though, all things considered, I had a pretty nice life, it might be even nicer if I had someone to share it with, but then you get busy at the store, or when you're not busy working you're dealing with sundry this-and-that connected to selling your mother's house and easing her into her new retirement community, or Canada Revenue decides to audit your already-struggling business, or... Like a lot of things, being alone wasn't a decision, it just happened.

When I had to shut down the shop because, even before the COVID hit, sales had been declining for years (digital books, online buying sites, the decline in interest in reading in general) and I couldn't afford another Toronto retail rent hike, that was something else that happened. Thankfully, the house is mortgage-free and the wine I drink is cheap and I can't recall having bought a new shirt or a pair of shoes since mullets were the haircut *du jour*. Between having to close down and box up and move several thousand books and needing to think about things I never had to think about before, like venturing into the virtual world of retail, I didn't have as much time to puff away the night and ponder the infinite.

And what do you know? Not only was I surprised to discover that there wasn't anyone in my life I could have a conversation with other than people I was biologically related to or ex-customers or a handful of neighbourhood merchants, I was also tired of listening to all-Jerry, all the time. Jerry was still Jerry, the Dead were still the Dead, but even the sublime can become samey. I also suspected I might be smoking too much pot. I even drew up a list of pros and cons. As might be expected, the con side of the page filled up rather quickly.

*Pot tends to insulate and isolate, makes other people and other, non-pot related things oh-for-sure nice, but really not that interesting or all that necessary.*

*Weed might not make you lazy, but it definitely encourages you to believe that most things probably aren't worth doing. Which may or may not be the same thing. I don't know, I could never be bothered to figure it out.*

*You are what you eat, and if swallow enough marijuana smoke over a long enough period of time you get lung-weakened wheezy as well as prone to consuming post-toking midnight snacks of alarmingly high caloric proportions.*

*Pot is a lot of things – a momentary time-out from our tick-tocking temporal existence; cloudy confirmation that the path we all travel, everyday evidence to the contrary, is no simple highway; the sensory death sentence that is sometimes called reality repealed, rescinded, and revoked with every fresh toke – but an aphrodisiac isn't one of them. I hadn't been laid in years. Worse, I didn't particularly care that I hadn't been laid in years.*

*I forget number five. Oh, yeah: pot messes with your memory.*

The pro side of the page was slight by comparison:

*I like to get high.*

So I've made a decision: less pot and less Dead; more red wine and more reading. More specifically, I've decided to teach myself 2,500 years of Western philosophy, all of the most important thinkers, the greatest hits of intellectual history. Like a lot of people on the other side of middle-age, I've come to realize relatively late in the game that I've been so busy living, I've tended to neglect my life. I went to work immediately after high-school, a stock boy at Coles Bookstore, partly because I never enjoyed sitting in a classroom all day listening to someone else talk, partly because having a full-time job meant I could move out of my parents' home in Etobicoke and into my own place in Toronto. It worked out, I don't have any regrets – went from stock boy to sales staff to my

first job working for an antiquarian bookseller to one second-hand bookstore to another until my own shop and *que sera, sera* where did the decades go?

But if 70-something is my approximate expiration midnight – thanks for being born, Phil, and goodnight and please turn out the lights on the way out – my metaphorical mortality clock is coming up fast on 10 p.m. I figured I'm overdue when it comes to getting a better idea of who I am and what I'm doing here and where we're all going. Or at least found out what the history of philosophy's biggest and best-known brains believed it all means. Why not? I've got time.

★ ★ ★

This, I wasn't expecting.

"So how are we going to do this?" the young woman in the wheelchair says. I'm standing on the front porch of my house with my phone still at my ear; she's at the bottom of the steps doing the same thing with hers. We both lower our phones and look at each other. She's wearing a white mask and black sunglasses.

"I didn't..." I say. "I mean, the house isn't..."

"Don't worry about it," she says, removing her knapsack from the back of the wheelchair and tucking her phone inside. Zipping it back up, "If you can just grab my knapsack and my chair and bring them inside, that would be great. I'm hoping your computer is on the main floor."

"It's in the back, in the mud room."

"What's a mud room?" she says. She takes off her sunglasses and sticks them inside the knapsack too. Her hair is naturally wavy and dirty blonde and falls well past her shoulders. She's wearing black gloves without fingers on both hands, presumably to aid her in wheeling herself around.

"I'm not sure," I say. "These old houses, that's what they called the back rooms back then."

"How long have you lived here?"

Christ, I don't look *that* old, do I?

"We moved here in '04. No, '05. February, 2005."

"I got the impression from when we talked on the phone that you're the only person who lives here," she says. "Because you said you only have the one computer in the house."

"Right. I mean, my ex and I bought the place, but I'm the only one who lives here now."

She nods a couple of times, as if it's best if we put the entire subject behind us, and pushes herself up from her wheelchair, her hands on its armrests delivering her to her feet where she manages to stand up by holding on to the back of the chair. Without the slightest self-consciousness that I can see, she uses the wheelchair as a makeshift walker to get to the wooden handrail at the bottom of the steps which she uses for support.

"Do you think you can lift my chair into the house?" she says.

Again: how old does this girl think I am?

"No problem. But what about the...what about the steps?"

"Just get my bag and chair and I'll be right behind you."

I place the bag on the seat of the wheelchair and give it a heave-ho and start up the stairs. I can hear slow, thuddy, but steady steps behind me and want to turn around to see how she's managing, but by the time I get to the porch and set down the chair, she's there too. I lift her bag from the seat and she sits back down and we wheel and walk, respectively, inside.

Where Benjamin is ostensibly entering the Title, Author, Publisher, Year of Publication, and Condition of Book into his tablet to aid in getting the store's inventory online, but by the smirk on his face before he sees me and the look of feigned concentration after he does, it's obvious he's been texting someone instead of doing his job. Just when you thought people couldn't possibly get any dumber, duller, or more distracted, along comes sage technology to bestow upon humanity the ability to effortlessly engage with one another over such timeless

questions as “WHAT 4?” and “WHAT R U DOING?” and “IS SHE THERE 2?” That I managed to avoid owning a cell phone for as long as I did is my single proudest act of civil disobedience.

Benjamin looks up from the tablet like it physically pains him to be interrupted from his weighty labours, and I introduce him to Cameron and her to him.

“Hey,” he says.

“Hey,” she says.

And that’s all it takes – to be approximately the same age. I can walk into a coffee shop, and if there’s a geezer at a table sipping his espresso, we might not have a single thing in common – or, if we did, not even like each other – but there’s an undeniable ease of understanding between us merely because we were born in the same decade. The same songs, the same television programs, the same I-remember-where-I-was-when-that-happened stories: who we are isn’t just us.

“The computer’s back here,” I say, leading the way to the small office at the back of the house. Over my shoulder, in my best long-suffering, yet nonetheless benevolent boss tone I can manage, “We’ll be out back, Benjamin.”

For a U. of T. undergraduate who can’t decide whether he wants to be a post-modernist poet, a discipline-shattering academic, or perhaps a beguiling blend of both, he *has* to have a name like Benjamin. I get it, I was young and existentially amorphous once too: until we turn into ourselves, it’s necessary to impersonate who we want to be. And Benjamin’s okay. Really. It’s just that it’s the generational obligation of every 22-year-old to be insufferable to anyone over the age of 50. I’m actually a little jealous of him, and not just because he’s got me as an uncle. He’s young. He’s finishing up one university degree and planning to go to graduate school and get another. His parents are rich. No wonder he gets on my nerves sometimes.

Almost everything to do with my actual computer we could have done over the phone, but it’s

Toronto West Social Media Solutions policy to discuss with each of its clients in person their various web-based needs, and to do it, of course, in as safe and hygienically responsible a manner as possible.

“You don’t have to wear your mask if you don’t want to,” I say.

“Great,” she says, taking it off. “I never know if somebody...”

“It’s fine.”

Her face is thin and her nose is the same and long, and she has what looks like a permanently furrowed brow, like she’s been pondering some impenetrable riddle her entire short life.

Eventually, “I want to sell people books,” I say. “My books. Over the web. Like I used to do over the counter.”

“Right,” she says, tapping away at her tablet resting on her thigh. I wait for more questions; she continues to tap. Eventually looking up, “Have you given any thought to what URL you’d like to use for your new e-business?”

“You mean the name you type into Google?”

“Among other things, yes.” She says this with a slight, tight smile, the kind patience of the younger for the endearing cluelessness of her elders.

“Queen West Books,” I say. “That’s the name of my store.”

“The one that closed.”

“That’s right.”

“Hmm...”

*Hmm* is the polite version of “Are you sure you wouldn’t you like to reconsider your answer?”

“Why would I want to use a different name?” I say. “I was in business for 23 years. That’s nearly a quarter-century of brand identification and customer loyalty.” I impress myself with this unexpected burst of business-speak.

“Customers who in large part don’t exist anymore. Or at least not enough of them to keep your doors open.”

What I need is a website; what I don’t need is a Twitter-literate millennial’s cursory dismissal of the last two decades of my life. “I’m keeping the name,”

I say. “Whatever this” – I gesture toward the computer sitting in the middle of my desk – “is, I want it to be called Queen Street Books.”

Another partial smile. “No problem,” she says, attacking the keys again, only neglecting to say aloud, *It’s your money – if you want to waste it, that’s your business.*

“And what about your social media presence?” she says.

I know what she means – Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter, plus whatever other modern miracle I’m too old and/or indifferent to know about – but even if I’m destined to be only a virtual bookseller, I prefer the idea of spending my days primarily with paper and ink and the smell of old books, and not online chattering and posting and doing whatever else is cyber *au courant*.

“I just want to sell books,” I say.

“Right. Which is why it’s important to utilize every means possible to help you do just that. And social media is one of those means. We had a client – she sold imported glassware, so it’s not directly comparable to what you’re doing – but within just a month of putting together a fabulous Instagram page and a fairly active Facebook and Twitter—”

“I just want to sell books.”

“And I want to help you do that. That’s what you’re paying us for. Let us help.”

We’re sitting at opposite ends of the desk in what’s been my home office for years, but now is the store’s small office. It might feel good to spew and spit about pandemic bad luck and philistine landlords who would rather rent out their buildings to child-labour-powered multi-national clothing stores and to chic restaurants whose bills are as large as their portions are small, but it won’t reduce your monthly rent cheque a nickel. Better to be honest and admit that the world doesn’t really want the things it really needs and to just get on with the job at hand. Which, in my case, seems to mean playing squeezed-out roommate to a house crammed full of book-filled cardboard boxes and to getting used to the idea of being a cyberspace salesman.

“I guess I could get my nephew to look into handling that part of things,” I say. Isn’t everyone under the age of 30 ipso facto a social media authority?

“Great. Maybe he and I can have a quick chat before I go.”

Once we’re done discussing for the day design alternatives and online payment options and what kind of “traffic” I can initially expect once [www.queenwestbooks.ca](http://www.queenwestbooks.ca) is eventually up and “live” and linked up with [abe.com](http://abe.com), Cameron deposits her tablet in her knapsack and wheels herself into what used to be my living room but is now just one more room full of more and more books that need to be computer-catalogued. Benjamin is on his knees pulling several volumes of the *English Men of Letters* series out of a cardboard box. They’re hardback and uniform blue, and although none of them was published earlier than 1892 and there’s some foxing to their edges and ends and some of the pages are tanned and there’s some slight staining to the covers, considering their age they’re in overall good condition. It’s an incomplete set – the Sterne and Hume volumes are missing – but it’s books like these that remind me why I do what I do and want to continue doing it.

Benjamin thumb-flips through the book in his hands, beginning to end, a long, page-fluttering fart. Although he’s a skinny kid from the suburbs of Calgary who’s never been out of school longer than summer vacation, with his black beard and the Mason jar he insists upon drinking his water out of, he could pass for a turn-of-the-20th-century Virginia coal miner. I suppose I should just be thankful he doesn’t vape.

To Cameron, and still on his knees, “Can I interest you in a rare first edition of the White, Heterosexual, Land-owning English Men – and I do mean men only – of Letters series? Did I mention it’s very rare?”

For the first time today, Cameron laughs. “Not nearly rare enough,” she says.



“You’ve got that right,” Benjamin says, snapping shut the book, and then he laughs too.

JUNE 19

—*All of the history of philosophy books begin with the pre-Socratics, so here we go, Thales, sixth-century B.C., resident of Miletus, a Cretan colony on the coast of Asia Minor*

—*Aristotle said that Thales was the first real Greek philosopher because he was the first person in Western civilization to attempt to understand the world not by reference to mythology but via theories and hypotheses and the search for first principles*

—*Wow: the guy who created science. Too bad nobody knows where he’s buried. That would make for a humdinger of a tombstone epitaph. Everybody wants to be remembered for something – procreate a kid or two, get your name engraved on a plaque, sweat your way into the record books – and to be known as the person who created the primary means by which human beings have been conscious of existence for the last 2,500 years is a pretty good way to do it.*

—*My old store was a neighbourhood fixture for 23 years. Now it’s a Gap for Kids*

Zoran is my Serbian friend. He appeared in the shop one day and asked me if I had any books “about the famous author and poet W.H. Auden – full name Wystan Hugh Auden – the English writer, you see, who moved to United States of America at beginning of Second World War.” He wasn’t my most lucrative customer, but he was definitely the store’s most frequent visitor. Every couple of weeks he would unfailingly buy a book – likely something political, or it could just as well have been something recently acquired that I had on display near the cash register – but it was always as if he was paying for a parking space rather than purchasing something he

was actually going to take home and read. He *is* a reader, but of newspapers, every morning, accompanied by his pug, Tesla, walks to the corner store and buys all four Toronto dailies as well as the previous day’s *New York Times*. Thales wrote that “A multitude of words is no proof of a prudent mind,” but I don’t think I’ll tell Zoran. Wisdom shouldn’t get in the way of friendship. Which just might be wisdom, but, being a bookseller and not a philosopher, I wouldn’t know.

Besides, now that the bookstore is closed for good and the entire operation has been relocated to my home, Zoran is my sole in-house customer. I wasn’t expecting his dog Tesla and him to show up at my front door a week after the store went out of business, but I wasn’t especially surprised either. He knocked, I let them in, and I went back to unpacking boxes and he went back to doing what he’s always done, filling me in on what the world has been up to lately.

“This, I think, will interest you,” he says, as he always does before proceeding to tell me anyway. I go to the kitchen to get the clear glass bowl I keep for water for Tesla, and Zoran doesn’t wait for me to return to resume speaking. “This, you see,” he says, “is the situation. Nine people in lady beauty parlour in United States of America shot with gun and killed – *killed* – by man who is one time married to woman who work there, and this is only one little article—” He squeezes the thumb and forefinger of his right hand together until they’re almost touching to illustrate just how little – “at back of newspaper. Like man killing nine people with gun in lady beauty parlour in middle of day is...” He shrugs a so-what shrug and curls his lower lip and raises his upturned palms in front of him. Then he folds his arms across his chest and glares at me as if I’m personally responsible for laying out the foreign news section of the world’s newspapers and the consequent media diminishment of American gun violence. The grey fedora and dark blue suit jacket he always wears only add to the severity of his expression.

I respond the same way I always do, regardless of the specifics of the fresh horror story he supplies me with – “You’re right, you’re right” – and with eyes on the floor, hands on my hips, and a few slow head shakes to complete the troika of concern.

Satisfied that I’ve both understood and ascribe to the point he’s made, Zoran drops his hands to his sides and shakes his own head, but with the hint of a small, sad smile on his lips and a forgiving softness in his eyes. “So,” he says, clapping his hands – once, hard, loudly – “what is the new thing with you?” Tesla is used to these periodic explosions of sound and doesn’t lift his chin from the floor, just looks at me with his bulbous pug eyes like he’s also awaiting my answer.

“Not much,” I say, using the Exacto knife to slice open another box of books. “Not much at all, actually.” It sounds like an evasion or an attempt at humility or like I’m just trying to make conversation, but unfortunately it’s the truth. I consider telling him about my crash-course in 2,500 years of Western philosophy, but decide against it. What if I get lazy or bored or overwhelmed and never make it past Plato? Ignorance is bad enough; advertising it only makes it feel worse.

Zoran purses his lips and nods a couple of times, as if I’ve just told him I’ve been busy helping to develop a cure for cancer. Like most Europeans, Zoran believes that what I do is important – that I’m important. A seller of rare and good books is almost as impressive to a European as being an actual writer, the North American equivalent of being a successful defence attorney or a well-off surgeon. I try not to blow my cover by saying anything that might lead him to discover that I’m not a cultural ambassador but, in fact, only just another struggling salesman. But what the people around you think about you does make a difference. Too many days of just me, my Exacto knife, and Benjamin, and it’s difficult to escape the impression that your life’s work has essentially consisted in locating, acquiring, and making available for resale

a product that society would really rather not have. In Economics 101 terms: plenty of supply, not so much demand. But Zoran doesn’t see me or what I do for a living this way, views my occupation not as an unsound commercial enterprise but as a venerable vocation.

Like the first time he came into the shop asking for a book about Auden. He’d read or heard somewhere that Auden had immigrated from Britain to the United States just as war was declared between his native land and Germany and the blitz was about to begin, and he thought that his conflicting feelings about leaving home around the time of the NATO bombing of Serbia (relief and guilt; excitement and apprehension) might be clarified by learning how Auden dealt with his own bemused move. I’m not sure they ever were – he’s lived in Canada now for over 20 years, and I think he’s slightly surprised to find himself not just still here but transformed into an old man – but he returned to the bookstore the next week and the week after that, so the biography I pulled off the shelf for him must have meant something.

When NATO bombs began to fall on Belgrade soon after Serbian troops were ordered into Kosovo to quell the independence-seeking uprising there, Zoran’s son, whose business interests often took him to North America (what those interests were, Zoran has never volunteered and I never pry, although I suspect the black market), decided it was time for his father to join him on an extended holiday in Canada. Zoran was a night porter at a hotel that catered to rich Westerners, so it wasn’t as if he was leaving behind a promising career. One of the reasons I enjoy Zoran’s company is because he has a strong natural antipathy to bullshit, which speaks every language and knows no borders. “Understand,” he told me, soon after we met, “what Milosevic and those other murderous swine were up to – that, and the bombing of Belgrade, our city, our home – were not the only reason my son want to move us here. Civil war and international sanctions, these are not so good for business,

you see. Middle of decade of 1990s, Serbia has highest inflation rate in history. In *history*. There is time during these years when inflation is three percent per hour. Per *hour*. Everyone who get paid for job, he run – *run* – to turn pay into American dollars. Hard for you to believe, I understand, but believe me, at worst of it, my pay at end of week is worth newspaper and cup of coffee. My son, he may not be this, he may not be that, but he is good businessman.” Zoran tapped a forefinger to his head. “Smart,” he said. “In business-making way, you see. Very smart.”

I didn’t need italics for Zoran’s words to register. As with most Canadians, aside from the occasional interruption to our culture of cozy consumption, like during a world-wide pandemic, history is something I’ve learned in school or read about in books, not something I’ve actually lived through. Picking up a copy of V.S. Pritchett’s mammoth *Collected Essays* from a pile on the floor, “Now this, this is a serious book,” Zoran says. He opens the cover slowly, reverently, like if he goes too fast all of the power and perception inside will evaporate into the air. He turns each page just as carefully, not so much reading the words as inhaling their intellectual import. “This man,” he says, “he is well-respected writer, yes?”

I get up from my knees and massage my lower back, retract the blade of the Exacto knife and stick it in my rear pocket. “He was commonly regarded as Britain’s best living critic while he was alive, but he

was also” – I reach into the same pile and pull out Pritchett’s equally gargantuan *Collected Short Stories* – “well-known for his short fiction.” I pass the book to Zoran who stands there with a thousand-page door-stopper in each hand. He feigns weighing each collection and nods his frowning approval, the scales of literary justice in his 10 stubby fingers.

“Dobro, dobro,” he says, the Serbian word, I’ve come to know, meaning “good.” Zoran may own a Canadian passport, but when he’s especially impressed or upset or otherwise excited, it’s Serbian words that are first out of his mouth.

“This is a good life,” he says, and at first I misunderstand him, think he’s referring to himself or me or maybe both of us. “This,” he says, arms extended now, holding each volume in front of him like a preacher intent on spreading the Word, “is excellent use of lifetime. You *feel* what you have done with this life, yes?”

“Yes,” I say, because what else can I say?

Although he’s recently turned 70 and there are chairs to be had if he bothered to clear them of books, Zoran sits cross-legged on the floor beside Tesla with both Pritchett volumes resting on his lap. He opens the collection on top, the essays, and begins reading where it falls open, one hand keeping the book in place, the other hand stroking the sleeping Tesla between the ears. I retrieve my knife from my pocket and get back to work. I try not to be too loud. I don’t want to disturb them.

*from J’ACCUSE...! (POEM VERSUS SILENCE)*

*...verses contra injustice...*

# SUSPICION!

GEORGE ELLIOTT CLARKE

XXXI.

Sidling, foot-crippled, hobbling, funky, beside those chunky, unbridled ripples stippling Venetian canals, each pain-killing pill like shucked-shell shrimp— I’d no hint that shrill, hacking, *insider* academics were dishing (all fucked up), impish, about « a Golliwog who might flog the wrong poet to the wrong room... »

So, despite any mollifying, fog-qualifying perfume of dank cigarette smoke, banking upwards like fluke Stukas— each untoward palooka (each a joke) figured to jail—nail—that “triggering” nigger, I, pinch black me, inch by inch, winch me up for a lynching— due to their hissed *Suspicion* that I’d big up a poet who’d done a blackguard *Crime*. So, brush-tarred I merited *Derision*. (Imprisoned I was in lisping *Misprision*.)

★

Thus suddenly unspeakable became my lecture— yet unwritten, let alone unspoken. The *Ridiculous* had become *Sublime*!



So, that hectoring, conjecturing rednecks—  
(some branded with protectorate doctorates)—  
expectorated outta their Ivory Tower,  
unduly, doubtlessly suspicious  
that a foolhardy black minstrel-prof might  
declaim a white poet, once a dastard—  
but now presentably beaming like a sunflower—  
no more a bastard, but as dreamy as sunlight...

XXXII.

While calico-coloured, oatmeal-discoloured, rain-frisked leaves  
whisked Venetian canals with whiskey hues—  
shades of drowned bees—  
a rippling iridescence—a stippled palette—  
each as dead as a tensely stubbed-out cigarette—

★

I didn’t suspect all the *Suspicion*  
being emitted, admitted, by danged scholars—  
all their derisive, incisive, fangs and molars—  
aimed at my jugular  
(in vulgar *Ambition*)  
to bleed out my dolichocephalic bighead,  
i.e., my misbegotten, non-seraphic, too rotten egghead...

★

The Bible itself got chopped up as *Anathema*—  
thanks to ass-phlegm blasphemies (*santorum*) shouted  
during “Mergency meetins o da ‘F/X’★ Committee”  
to hector—*heroically*—a lecture still a phantasmal schema...  
Votes—grunted—shunted out each mouth’s kitty.  
Soon a stammering *Clamour* jackhammered my ears:  
To help a poet, I’d exculpate a killer; forgive his arrears!  
(Accusations never debated, so never doubted.)

★

Meanwhile, I was goblin-postured, hobbled in Venice—  
oblivious to being sleazed by a cabal  
(who smeared me as consanguineous with sanguine S.K.),  
demarcating yours truly as a committed rat-fink—  
due to audacious, salacious *Suspicion*—  
and an Inquisitor’s prognosticating diagnostics—  
banal, bland, and so consummately *blanc-and-noir*—  
it seemed almost as if our boudoirs were interchangeable...

★ *Special Effects*: The funhouse-mirror side of *Ethics*?

XXXIII.

Venezia shed leaves while chill page leaves turned.  
(The *News*? Each dread *Faith* wills its heretics burned.)

In Regina, now were goutts of snow—avalanches—  
clouting every once-bare, provisionally virginal, black branch...

★

(Hear the pantomime of gasps as chalk rasped, smearing blackboards,  
the yacking volume of an unerring hatchet job ratcheting up.

Snake-eyed commentators all dissertating *Suspicion*,  
I'd exonerate a pervert and desecrate a poet...)

★

Thus, a degenerate *Intelligentsia*—  
each teach silo'd in *Ignominy* and *Acrimony*—  
fingered this *clerk* as a doctorated, decorated gremlin—  
who'd alight from an Ivory Tower Kremlin—  
linger—malingering—long enough—  
to puff up Brown, huff at his persecutors.

But their misexecuted *Calumny*  
excommunicated *Poesy*,  
not *White Supremacy*.

★

So, I had to prove undiluted black—  
according to slated drafts—  
chalk as white as the fried tears  
of sunlight-dried-up maggots...

XXXIV.

But to that tumultuous *Panic*, I was incognizant—  
for moonlight chopped at my silhouette—  
on my grape-splattered bib of earth—  
with a slop of blush—*Rosato*—plus mythic giblets—  
add-on splashes of white *vino* and a dash of anisette—  
of wallet-shattering *Worth*—  
at spiffy Locanda Montin Antico—  
where iffy Pound had sought shelter from *Suspicion*.

★

Was not the right thing left for Pound to do only  
to confess?  
To figure the signature luminary  
professing, blaring, his ineffaceable *Fascism*—  
echoing a technique of *Candour*  
(compatible with his truth—  
tabulating how the swastika caught him—taut—  
in its black, tarantula tentacles)?  
Truly was this *koan* (公案) telegraphed—compassed—  
by *The Pisan*—partisan—*Cantos* (nothin half-assed).  
Meanwhile, I limped—a gimp—about that pirate marsh—  
cuttlefish-ink-dark—  
scuttling, outfitted with harsh cephalixin and indomethacin,  
parked in my jaw, swallowed with phlegm.

★

(And Pound one more the poet exemplar—since Ovid—  
since Lorca—since Mandelstam—since B.C. (Before COVID)—  
since Malcolm X—since Aesop (th'Ethiope)—since Sappho—  
since Juvenal—since Wilde—since Sade—since Cicero—  
since Dante—since Moloise—since Riel—since Euripedes—  
since Saro-Wiwa—since Brodsky—since Socrates—  
since Khashoggi—since Céline—since Ould al-Wahid—  
since “Angela”—since Gramsci—since Eddy Said—  
since Neruda—since Akhmatova—since Zola—to run afoul  
of regime after regime of attempted regimen of the *Soul*.)



XXXV.

Already at Regina, on that *angina*-afflicted campus,  
wasn't I the blackboard, blacklisted catawampus?

Would I not natter bout a killer's limericks,  
then buck-tooth guffaw—  
a roly-poly Falstaff laugh—  
as if a jolly Golliwog—  
and call the throng to hardy-har-har along?

This prejudgement (*Prejudice*) spurred *Connption*—  
abrupt, corruptive seething—like that Roman mob  
that blamed a blubbering poet\*  
for the knives forked slobbering into white-bread Caesar  
till *le roi* torqued  
bloody to the waist,  
so the glamorous body appeared to be teething...

★

Abseiling over Venezia, and then availed of smoky Roma,  
I was oblivious to insidious eves—  
the *poesia*-induced comas—

pedants' bung-hole nostrils snotty with holier-than-thou *Suspicion*:

I'd puff up an ex-con poet—  
buff him with academic kudos—  
and take no guff from huffing censors—  
but tough out a family's still-raw *Grief*—  
just slough it off, scoff...

Well, the *Truth* is immaterial—  
like soil-drowned miners, bereft of official burial.

★ "In all ages and cultures, poets have been lost / before they could be found and encouraged."  
—Adrienne Rich (as quoted in Giovanna Riccio, *Vittorio* [2010]). So let us also salute *all* those  
Indigenous "whose voices have been lost too soon / and for all those whose voices are still singing"  
(Jesse Rae Archibald-Barber).

XXXVI.

So, with a foot palpably sore and implacably jittery—  
and with indomethacin afoot and more cephalixin for eatery  
(a placating, sedating *smörgåsbord* )—  
I hobbled—bobbled—niggerish—egregious—wrong-headed—  
among Venezia's *Vinho-Verde*-verdigris, leaded-green canals—  
still asinine—yes—bout analphabetic,  
*F/X* Committees—  
ejaculating *Rhetoric*—briny—round and round—  
circular as two crab-louses joined—  
a gibberish fusing ragamuffin McCarthy  
(Pinocchio Joe or dummy Charlie)  
and a gewgaw "McGuffin"  
(look it up).

Indeed, these anonymous, hyperventilating censors—  
those smugly intransigent lugs—  
as if shrunken heads (*tsantas*), smirking—  
drunk on *Harrumph*, but *Bumf*-fed—  
coined a pathetic *Suspicion*:  
I'd quote a poet to okay his crime(s).

★

*À* Roma—not La Roma,  
Distrito Federal (where Giovanna  
and I'd tarried the Feb befo,  
to testify—to *Poetry*—with then-believable Steve,  
our bardic, "Hogtown" trio attuned to the *Bardo*—  
*avec* guitars, keyboards, drums,  
swooning with moonshine—  
plums, almonds, oysters [a *smörgåsbord* ]  
at Las Muertas, i.e. *The Dead*)...

No, @ Roma (Italia), I roamed,  
for John Cabot U. had headlined my talk—  
“Must Poets Hang with Murderers?  
A Meditation on Poetics and ‘Justice.’”  
I sought no *Sympathy* for devils—  
Villon, Pound, Caravaggio, Burroughs, etc...  
So I lounged in the gilt-and-marble lobby of Hotel Des Epoques,  
oblivious to garbled but cockamamie *Gobbledygook*,  
as I typed my typically lilting peroration,  
elevating *Poetry*, not melting into *Silence*.

Scan the QR for George Elliott Clarke on those  
who attempted to “cancel” him – which resulted in  
his book, *J’Accuse...! (Poem Versus Silence)* 5:05  
or go to:  
[tinyurl.com/accuse-jaccuse](https://tinyurl.com/accuse-jaccuse)



Scan the QR for George Elliott Clarke's *raison d'être*  
for his book, *J’Accuse...! (Poem Versus Silence)* 3:52  
or go to:  
[tinyurl.com/raison-jaccuse](https://tinyurl.com/raison-jaccuse)



Photograph by Sefa Kaya/Shutterstock

# I DON’T KNOW WHY

MADELINE SONIK

The old woman’s flesh, stretched and sagging, unfolded over the gurney like a vinyl tarp. The surgeons had removed the horse. Black and shiny, slick as spit, and with the help of two operating room attendants, two nurses, and a bug-eyed anaesthetist, piled its sorry carcass in another corner of the operating theatre. The horse was a gelding, an Oldenburg. Deep-chested, strong-necked, heavy-hooved.

The barrel of its body was oddly expanded; yet even with this deformation, one could imagine it stepping fastidiously over a cedar trail, strong and well-postured, carrying the old woman, whose face and extremities were as brilliant an unearthly white as the horse was black. The old woman was dead, of course. There had been no saving her. After failed efforts to retrieve her grossly distended body by ambulance, she arrived at the hospital’s emergency entrance in a hay wagon, the purported victim of a riding accident. She was nearly dead then. It had taken the wagon forever to haul her up and over a hill. Even with earlier medical attention, it would have been the same. The fact she had hung on as long as she had was a miracle, for the horse had crushed every organ in her body and completely flattened her heart. But the removal of the lethal horse was not the end of this strange proceeding, for just as the anaesthetist was leaving the operating room, it came to the attention of one of the surgeons that the dead horse was moving.

It was soon discovered that inside the horse, there existed in its entirety a dead cow, still in the grip of reflexive spasms, and inside the cow, a goat in the early stages of rigor mortis. The surgeons were almost fearful to proceed, yet scientific curiosity drove them forward with their scalpels to unearth a decaying border collie inside of the goat.



A hush descended in the theatre as both surgeons paused to mop their brows. In the excision of the dead animals, the anesthetist's usefulness had been reduced to that of voyeur. The nurses and operating room attendants also found their presence redundant, but in spite of their growing queasiness couldn't bring themselves to leave.

"It's just like one of those Matryoshka dolls," nurse Glinda Brown muttered, recalling the large, wooden nesting doll that graced her grandmother's mantel. As a child, she'd been allowed to play with it, and recalled the delight and surprise that accompanied the twist of each body's opening. How excited she had been to discover the miniature revelations, to see them spill one from the other. She considered this now, this pure, happy memory, and realized how, by association with this grotesque and inexplicable horror, it would be forever changed.

The other nurse, Susan Lacey, who'd once been an aspiring Egyptologist, thought instead of the Valley of Kings, the practices of mummification and entombment, and just like those nesting dolls Glinda evoked, the way sarcophagi contained sarcophagi. If it had just been her and Glinda, she may have expressed this thought, but knowing how the applied science of medicine despised and mocked the humanities, and how the males of their surgical team likewise despised and mocked her and Glinda, she thought it best to remain mute.

Both nurses had suffered bullying at the hands of their male colleagues. The operating room attendants and the anesthetist routinely shamed them, while the surgeons frequently berated them, and during various stressful times, hurled sharp metal objects at their heads. Another nurse, who'd suffered similar abuse, lodged a complaint and when she was summarily dismissed, Lacey and Brown knew better than to protest.

Nursing required endurance, of steeling oneself, of sucking things up. "It's because we're powerful that they act this way," Susan whispered, but neither she nor Glinda believed it. If they really were powerful, wouldn't they have been able to stop the abuse?

Wouldn't they have been able to meet the taunts and threats head-on, instead of secretly evoking dark scenarios in which they visualized their tormentors hounded and hectored and pestered to death?

Glinda considered this as a scalpel was driven into the dead dog's sagging belly. The operating room attendants covered their eyes, and the anesthetist's face winced and crumpled.

From the dog's gut, the remains of a tabby cat swam in a whoosh of fluid. "Enough," cried the anesthetist. "We've seen enough." But his words had no impact, for both surgeons with scalpels poised were already picking around the fur and fiber of the cat, searching for the next point of entry.

As repulsed as Glinda was, she couldn't help but take pleasure in her colleagues' discomfort. It was the kind of thing she and Susan had wished for on many occasions. "May horror haunt you," Susan had whispered under her breath. "May your days be filled with dread," Glinda had added. They giggled about these curses afterwards, saw them as a kind of pressure relief valve.

A quick turn of the surgeon's knife, just below the tabby's bloated throat, brought Glinda back from her reverie. A set of thoroughly immaculate sparrow bones appeared. The surgeons marvelled at the cleanliness of this delicate cage. The ribs of the bird overlapped, and its back and breastbone remained completely intact.

One of the surgeons carefully lifted the bones from the cat's throat. Now that the pieces of the puzzle were all present, they would most certainly need a logical assembling. But just as he was about to set the feather-light bird frame down, something dropped from its beak to the floor. The object was small and as brittle as a dried violet; on closer inspection, the surgeons identified the desiccated legs and body of a spider, shrivelled, yet remarkably well preserved, and what's more, the abdomen of the spider was bulging.

It was with the greatest of care and the steadiest of hand that the scalpel was wielded. A small nick in the spider's nutshell abdomen was enough to split it

open. Inside of the shrivelled spider was a fly. Its dark body not in the least faded, its wings complete. Its multi-glistening, green-blue compound eyes glinted with a flicker of animation. The surgeons argued over how such a well-preserved specimen might be displayed (an entomologist's case or the glass bulb of a paperweight) and who, for they'd both been diligent in this excision, would get to claim this trophy for display in their waiting room.

The stunned nurses, Lacey and Brown, were reprimanded for their indolence. Surely, they could see that a specimen jar was in order. As the two women hustled to retrieve a container, the fly, resplendent upon the tip of the scalpel, much to the shock of all assembled, suddenly took flight. It ascended swiftly and directly towards the harsh surgical lights. No eyes could follow its progress. In a second it had vanished.

The memory of these strange events lingered and all who witnessed them suffered the uncomfortable amplitude of an experience too rich to fully digest. This surfeit took on a predominantly destructive character. In the case of one of the O.R. attendants, his persistent obsession to know the motivations that led to the old woman's death caused an increasing fascination with livestock and insects.

He left his job at the hospital to devote himself entirely to this study. Although most farms that reared the diverse species found inside the woman no longer existed as multinational corporations had gobbled them up, he eventually located a small family farm as his research project. The operation boasted four strong Norwegian Fjords for plowing, 15 Jersey cows, half a dozen Angora goats, one schnauzer and a barn full of mix-breed cats. Swallows darted elegantly over the fields and formed muddy cup-shaped nests on barn beams and overhangs. Orb-weaving spiders, too, created sticky webs in these places, while thousands and thousands of disparate flies flew in and out through open windows. There were blowflies and flesh flies and botflies, flies that sucked blood and flies that ate

manure. Flies that fastened themselves around the eyes and ankles of cows, as well as ones that were swished away by strong impatient tails.

Because the farmer believed the O.R. attendant's research was intended to prevent small farms, such as his, from being consumed by large-scale predatory companies, he allowed him to camp on his land, sanctioned his study, and provided absolute access. He grew suspicious, however, when it became apparent the man carried with him no note pads nor any recording devices. Besides this most apparent lack of professionalism, there was also the question of his research methodology, which appeared to the farmer nothing more than gawking and gaping. In the end, he had to take out a restraining order to keep the lunatic off his land, but the obsessive man's preoccupation had grown to such an absorbing fixation he wouldn't be bridled by law. He moved his tent beyond the farm's property line, and under the cloak of night carried out his covert rendezvous, repeating, as if a mantra, "I don't know why she swallowed the fly." He was certain that the enlightenment he sought would descend upon him in an illuminating flash if only he could work his way to the inside of what he was beginning to define as the oneness of all creation.

He was neither a psychologist nor a philosopher, yet he intuited that the old woman's motivation for her boa-constrictor style slaughter and suicide could only be known by experiencing the minds of the insects and animals she'd consumed. With flashlight in hand, he silently communed with the gloomy-eyed horses and gentle cows, with the mischievous goats that tried to eat the cuffs of his pants, and the yappy dog that he inevitably had to muzzle with an anti-bark device. The barn cats expressed their sense of indignation, resignation, and karmic injustice, while the barn swallows pretended they slept. The spiders rested at the centres of their webs, great ego consciousnesses, surrounded by all-encompassing selves, and the flies, for even at nighttime there were hordes of them, swiftly evaded his approach, mocking and jeering, and calling, he was certain: "Catch

us if you can, you troubled, confounded, inquiring man.”

Their words landed in his head with all seeing compound eyes and a rainbow’s iridescence, but he was still unable to grasp hold of the puzzle’s solution. The secret poked constantly at his waking thoughts, like a large, regurgitating proboscis.

Then, one day, the great mystery unfolded within him like the pleats of a giant accordion. He had never known anything so large. It opened and opened, filling him as if he were a small pitcher, overflowing. Through his mouth and into his head, the sounds of barnyard creatures became ghostly music. In the surrounding darkness he was becoming pure light. The sensation in his body was so swift and overwhelming that he could not pay attention to the thoughts shooting through him, though he was able to capture one fleeting, fluttering, wriggling, jiggling perception: Human beings had difficulty experiencing more than one thing at one time. On its own, it didn’t seem a particularly profound insight. Then, all became bird cheeps and horse whinnies. The world closed in upon him, just as if it were two barn doors over a gate’s groundsill. The following morning he was discovered on all fours with eyes as glassy and dark as the most melancholy cow’s. There was nothing he could say as the farmer cursed him, as ambulance attendants hauled him away, as a bed was made ready for him in the very hospital he had once worked in. “Moo...” was his only thought. “Moo...moooo,” for the mystery had been transmuted. Yet it would not easily come to an end.

The second O.R. attendant also struggled with the incident. It haunted him like a hungry phantom, clinging to his consciousness, though his quest was anything but the desire to understand it. His wish, instead, was to obliterate every residuum of it.

“I don’t care why she swallowed the fly,” he said to himself again and again, a kind of magical aphorism he believed would keep thoughts of the gory scene at bay. Yet his bedroom walls at night depicted

images of the broadened woman in shadow and the buoyant sparkling fly. His days were filled with the splash and clatter of sounds his mind instinctively poured into the plaguing memory. The clink of a knife against a plate would recall for him the probing scalpel, while the swish of water in the kitchen sink would conjure thoughts of flowing fleece and fur. The buzz of voices, of radio static, of the internal monologue of the world, generated in his tired mind swarms of mulish insects.

“I don’t care why she swallowed the fly,” he would repeat aloud, with increasing desperation, several hundred thousand times a day. “I don’t care why! I don’t care why!” And when it became apparent to him that his mind would not believe his protests, he took to systematically attempting to obliterate all thought with the drinking of very potent Scotch and the obsessive attending of brothels. Sex and alcohol, taken together in large quantities, had a numbing amnesiac effect, and all may have worked well for him if it hadn’t been that one day he found himself beneath a large horsey woman at the brothel, who possessed a genuine World War I British cavalry riding crop.

“I don’t care why she swallowed the fly,” he began repeating in breathless desperation before ecstatically swooning. He remained unresponsive for over an hour. His hands and feet grew cold, his flesh became a mottled grey, and his breath grew shallower and shallower. A drone, like a thousand blue-bottles, permeated the outer hall as the brothel keeper and her staff determined what to do. “A corpse in the house will absolutely kill business,” she lamented.

Fifteen minutes later, the man, packaged and weighted with lead, was promptly disposed of in the sea. As the briny deep infused his nostrils, he awoke from a dream of a mare named “Mystery” galloping crazily towards him. He’d just devised a way to avoid the creature’s trampling hooves when all turned to buzzing foam and sparkling water, embracing him like the body of a hungry old woman.

Various unhappy fates befell other witnesses.

One of the surgeons hanged himself, while the other jumped, without parachute, from a plane. The anesthesiologist, after resigning from his job, changing his name, and finding an entirely different occupation, succumbed to a morphine overdose.

Since the horrific exhuming and the annihilation of most of the former surgical team, Nurses Brown and Lacey’s work environment improved and they found no more need for their ritual blighting. However, their thoughts remained far from untroubled. Glinda Brown’s mind persistently lighted around memories of her grandmother. She saw the old woman cooking her favorite ethnic dishes, telling her Russian folk tales, while Glinda played with the tainted nesting dolls. No amount of mental swatting could quash the image of the hospital’s butchery. It was like a Chinese finger trap: The more she fought against its grip, the greater became its hold, and she wracked her exhausted brain trying to devise an escape.

She’d learned a trick in a psychiatric nursing class based on a well-known experiment. Intentionally avoiding thoughts of white bears tended to make the mind perversely produce them. Perhaps she could escape the mélange of dismembered animals, she considered, by focusing her efforts in trying not to think about one that was whole, and pure, and white. “Don’t think of a white bear,” she told herself, and within moments, the gruesome carnage of the operating room vanished, and a friendly polar bear materialized. In her mind’s eye, it loped along snowy arctic pathways, and she sighed with relief in breaking free from the combat of reflexive traumatic memory. Her respite, however, was short-lived. The bear left its snowy fields, ambled up the stairs of a hospital and hungrily pawed its way into the fateful operating room. Its nose twitched as it sniffed the air and beheld the mess of bloody dissevered life. Through its ravenous eyes, the heap was just available meat. It pushed forward, knocking over surgical tables and the anesthesia cart, consuming the grotesque mass of quivering flesh. It was almost more than she could bear, she

thought. The horrible pun struck with surgical precision.

That evening, shadows careered across her bedroom ceiling: grossly distended old ladies and their menageries pursued by a rider of icebergs. Repression zapped her energy. Even thinking that the shocking memory should be kept at bay conjured images of howling border collies. In panic and despair, she made her way to Susan Lacey’s place, only to discover that her co-worker was undergoing ordeals of her own.

Anubis, the Egyptian jackal-headed god of the dead, had begun making nightly visitations to her. Frequently, he was flanked by the goddess Ammut, a terrifying composite creature with crocodile head, lion torso, and hippopotamus back parts. “She’s known as the devourer of souls,” Susan said.

“It’s only a recurring nightmare,” Glinda tried to assuage her own anxiety by comforting. “You shouldn’t pay any attention,” though she knew the advice was absurd.

“I believe this is some sort of curse,” Susan suggested, no longer fearing what others might think of her past study of pharaonic Egypt. The old lady and the beasts, she explained, were sarcophagi of sorts. She was certain that the horrific dissections and excisions had triggered something powerful and malignant. “There were eight creatures consumed,” she said, “a number particularly important to the Egyptians. In fact, the elite often had an ensemble of eight nesting caskets.” Not only was disturbing a tomb profane, but cutting open a corpse without Anubis’ blessing was a heinous violation, she told her.

“But we didn’t do the surgery,” Glinda protested.

“We didn’t try to stop it, either,” Susan said, “and that not only makes us culpable, it also means we’re condemned.”

“Surely not,” Glinda laughed lightly, feeling the pit of her stomach sink.

Neither entertained the possibility that such a curse may have been wrought by their own incessant



maledictions. Neither believed herself capable of harming a fly. It would never occur to them that the toxins of justified hatred they'd discreetly discharged against their tormentors required careful handling and had blown back upon them like a lethal insecticide.

"You've heard about the curse of Tutankhamun, haven't you? Twenty-two people died, and only a few of them were directly involved in excavation and dissection." Susan spoke with authority.

Glinda chuckled uncomfortably. "I doubt very much the old woman was Egyptian."

"It doesn't matter." Susan's agitation was infectious. "A violation is a violation and the eye of Ra knows no geographic bounds."

Glinda lapsed back to thoughts of childhood. She knew it wasn't the same thing, but her grandmother often spoke of the evil eye, which she called the *sglazi*. It could wither crops, kill animals, devastate nations. She hung a pair of old shoes outside of her bedroom window to ward it off, and sometimes, when she felt *sglazi* threaten, she'd quickly cross herself and spit three times. "Curses are like chickens," she'd mutter cryptically. "In the end, they always come home to roost."

"We need to stay calm." Susan was speaking to herself as much as to Glinda, who was now all of five years old, sitting on her grandmother's soft lap, a pert little monkey in pedal pusher pants, enjoying the story of a childless couple who'd fashioned a boy from clay. The boy was insatiably hungry and devoured everything in sight. Glinda had been amused by the silliness. Now, however, she saw with

the most vivid of internal vision the hopeless carnage of the operating room and felt overwhelmingly suicidal.

"We also need to take action," Susan declared, nudging Glinda from the despond that was engulfing her. "We can't just wait to be picked off like sitting ducks."

The two women stood in Susan's rustic kitchen, the buzz of their anxious voices ascending. Neither were aware of being observed. Neither realized that high above them thousands of photoreception units were differentiating their movements.

"We need to find a way to fight this," Susan said, slamming her hand down, making her skeptical friend jump. "We need to protect ourselves."

The ceiling observer rubbed her forelimbs, like a miser rubbing hands. If she could have sardonically chuckled, she would have. Her metallic body sparkled as she considered her two human accomplices. They had summoned her, a curse, into the world and fed her with their passive vengeance. Now, she hovered above them, a demon of death and putrefaction, absorbing through her antennas the exhilarating scents of their ignorance and terror. She imagined them cadavers and scanned them for visible orifices where her eggs could safely be secured. The stench they presently exuded would vanish. All that would remain would be their panicked, fetid sweat. Her eggs would mature in their decaying apertures and her tubular young, feed and feed, eventually shedding their earthbound bodies and flying off into the all-consuming world.



INTRODUCING

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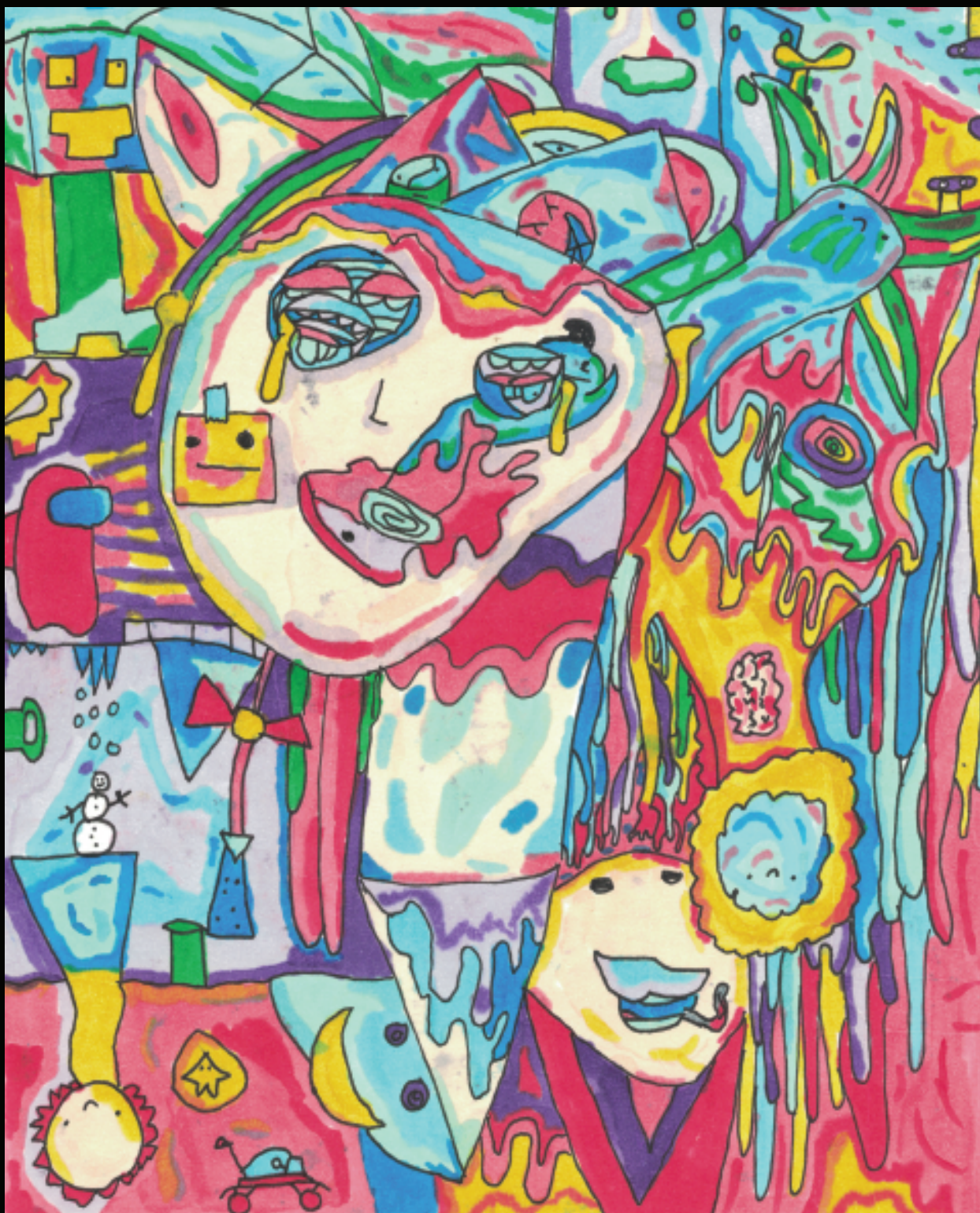














# LOUISA, LOUISE

## SEGUN AFOLABI

Say you took Elizabeth Street rather than the Pimlico Road? Say you rolled out of bed on the left, not the right-hand side? Or chose the fruit salad instead of the English breakfast, perhaps only a slice of buttered toast? What would that mean? For you? How might that alter your day? Your week? Would it change a single aspect of your life? Make it better or worse? Or remain exactly the same?

She cannot decide, Louisa. The left or the right? Cannot make up her mind about one thing or the other today. Black canvas pumps or the new leather shoes she wore on the plane? Both pairs assembled in front of her like schnauzers while she dangles her feet over the side of the bed, facing away from the window. The right side. Wrong choice? Perhaps a pear or an apple, a swig of grapefruit juice before she departs? Something to sustain her until midday.

All night, it seems, people tramping up and down the stairs, along the hallway. *Aren't we on the third floor?* Guests yapping, no consideration for others. Children too, being dragged by their parents. *Don't want to! Screeching. I want to go with you!* What kind of place is this? And then the people in the next room, television turned up to watch something – football, basketball, some overseas sport? Intermittent cheers, laughter, doors slamming, feeble walls billowing like sheets on a washing line. She felt all this disturbance in her bed, her body, all night long it seems. Now groggy and gummy-mouthed, she feels the dull ache of the hung-over, the wasted, beside the gutter the morning after, dress hitched around the waist. Location unknown. She remembers.

A touch of mascara? Rouge? Nothing at all? She plumps for a smudge of fuchsia lip tint to gather her face, take away from the hangdog appearance, the cracked eyes and bunched cheeks, the crow's feet that are here to stay, then blots her lips until the makeup is barely discernible. Black tights and a newly knit wool sweater (Thank you, Comfort) beneath her clothes to insulate against the

cold. She eases her feet into the canvas shoes in case there's more walking than she anticipates. 8:11 a.m. And now she is late.

She takes the stairs two at a time and hurries through reception. "Morning!" She smiles. They stare. Guests, receptionist, a sous-chef sporting a hoary goatee and a tray of steaming plum tomatoes. "Morning!" Still smiling as she pushes against the revolving doors. And still their gaze follows her. No time for coffee or sausages with her schedule knocked sideways and a stomach wild as the waves on the Costa de la Luz.

"How is it a person can smile so much?" people ask sometimes as she moves through the streets. Through Jerez, the market stalls, along the aisle as she takes a seat on the bus, as she passes children on their way to, or from, school. *Always sunny, like the summertime.* Louisa. A glint in her eye (so you know it's genuine), not the surface smile of the cunning or insincere. A little chat in the confectioners when she's purchasing sweetmeats or treats for home, for herself, for her sisters – in Spanish as chipped as an over-used ceramic bowl, a lingering hint of the London streets.

She stops, takes in the vista – Cricklewood: the intersection, cars and buses and lorries barrelling through. A world away from where she used to live in the south of the city. A few strides from the hotel and already the pavement is thick with bodies hurtling to work, several dragging suitcases behind them, a litter of men on a street corner waiting for what, she doesn't know. Something nips at her heels, a winter wind licking at her ankles. She feels the shudder of vehicles, the honk of impatient drivers, pedestrians tut-ting as they are forced to swerve around her. *Who would miss this?* she thinks. This chaos, even as she understands that at some level, she does.

Inhale, exhale. Wonder at your unfurling breath in the February air. Like a trick, an illusion you are able to carry out at no expense. As a child she marvelled at this feat, this ability to manipulate the fog of her breath on winter mornings. One minute an

ice queen or a polar explorer, the next a Hollywood starlet in a cocktail bar holding aloft a cigarette holder. Until her imagination was overtaken by the actual witchy plume of cigarette smoke. Cigarettes, spliffs, and so it goes.

She checks her watch. 8:20. She should have eaten a slice of toast at least, slung back a few gulps of watery coffee. Surely there is time? She thinks of the little hotel, having to change her clothes simply to sit in the cramped breakfast area while all around her guests wolf down as much food as humanly possible before, eventually, everything is depleted. Apart from the pellets of bran. No, should hunger strike she will break into the kitty she has planned to spend on her sisters – on jars of marmalade, tins of Earl Grey tea, chocolate bars, postcards – and buy a Mars Bar or a Milky Way. Something she remembers from way back.

At the bus stop there are glances. Two men in donkey jackets openly stare. She offers up a smile and in their confusion, or shame, they turn away, continue a phantom conversation, moving their mouths, although she cannot decipher their words. Perhaps another language? She rubs her arms and stamps her feet to keep the blood circulating, then understands the reason for the draught on her legs, the chill in her toes. In her haste, she has forgotten to wear socks over her stockings and these tennis shoes are inadequate. She could return to the hotel but it is 8:31 and she hasn't 20 minutes to squander. Not after all this time. These months, these years.

This routine she has carried out for the past two days. Breakfast, the brisk walk to the bus stop, the daily tour through Kilburn, the Edgware Road, along Park Lane, hugging the palace grounds, the buzz and fizz of Victoria, hurrying past commuters, like making one's way into a relentless wind. She finds the station becoming a little more familiar, although there is something new to discover each time. On Tuesday, a gospel choir serenaded commuters with morning cheer in their bid to raise funds. Several singers waved as she passed by. She waved back and smiled and stood for a minute to



listen and hurried on. Only yesterday a team of orange-vested men and women handed out cereal bars from plastic satchels slung across their backs. She gladly accepted one and asked for another. How could they refuse? And in that way she was able to forfeit lunch and earn a satisfying early evening meal that carried her to the next day. To this morning.

“Scuse, Miss?” A woman is sitting cross-legged on the pavement outside Victoria Station, bundled up in sweaters and sleeping bags and odd bits of paraphernalia. For a moment Louisa believes she has stepped on her or disturbed her campground in some way. But then she sees the held-out hand, the wavering fingers.

“Hello,” she says.

“Got a pound or something? Got me purse nicked. They nicked me purse.” Spoken with a degree of accusation, as if Louisa herself has been involved, has been a subterfuge, a distraction while bandits have whisked away the woman’s belongings. Although Louisa cannot imagine the woman carrying a purse or a handbag of any description. She closes her eyes for a moment, then opens them, sees the shaved head, trembling hand, gaze rising with an effort, not quite able to make eye contact, bottom lip folded out in a kind of droop. Not an old woman, not even middle-aged, but a face frayed by constant exposure to the elements, to elemental deprivations.

She recognizes the signs, Louisa, a person clinging to life. A body soaked in an ocean of alcohol and despair. A person hardly present, this woman before her.

“Here you go,” Louisa says and dips her hand into her travel pouch. She searches for a convenient spot on the woman’s campsite for fear of missing the swaying hand and places the heavy coins onto a clear space on the sleeping bag. 9:30.

“Ta, mate.” A soft cry trailing behind her. But Louisa is already out of hearing range, with a little less in the kitty and no time to dawdle today.

She hurries across the street and stops to collect her bearings. Right or left? She glances back to the woman – who has failed to engage another passerby

– then rallies her pace, the cold hardly noticeable now in her haste toward her destination.

Elizabeth Street or further along? She must decide. Everything depends on making the right connection, the correct decision. Who knows the consequences should she turn one way and forfeit the other? How might a five-minute delay affect the outcome and what if her choice turns out to be a shortcut? Then what? She must not be early, but it would be unthinkable to be late, to miss her deadline after all these years.

“Before it is too late,” Constanza said, while Comfort merely nodded in agreement. Her sisters. “You must go before the time, it is finished.” And Louisa understood that they were right. They have always supported one another in their life’s work, always encouraged and nurtured their younger sister.

9:36. There is still time. She chooses Ebury Bridge Road. It will take longer, but she cannot contemplate arriving early, being forced to loiter, arousing suspicion in the cold haughty street.

She neither hurries now, nor slows her pace. So many people dragging cases, lugging backpacks, arriving and departing from this place – London – as she herself did so very long ago. Gathered her belongings – which turned out to amount to not so much in the end – into a single holdall, and bolted as fast as she could. She left for the sun, for the heat, for somewhere to warm her bones, her cold heart because there was something the matter with it, a film of something (ice, mould?) surrounding it and she could think of no other way to repair herself. To effect a quiet thaw and get her heart beating steadily again.

*Got a pound or something?* Same thing, only different. Better the balmy Ramblas than this icy pavement in the depths of February. Better the sway of palm trees than the glacial streak of the Number 44, its occupants gawping as you debase yourself for pennies, as you struggle to keep warm. Pennies and pounds that will effect only a temporary release, a brisk visit to nirvana.

Quiet boutiques carry items as frivolous as carriage clocks and scatter cushions, and in one an

array of what appear to be varying sizes of ceramic bowls fastidiously arranged like works of art. Bowls she has made on a regular basis on an old potting wheel in the cool bare studio she considers a sanctuary, at home on the outskirts of Jerez. Perhaps not a studio; more a room to potter about, to paint or sew or even throw a pot, get one’s clothes filthy and simply not care. With its view of the sea, and the breeze as it lifts off the water in the height of summer when a cool wind is needed most. Home.

Two golden chairs, a spray of lilies. Not much. An overstuffed maroon velvet couch. She cannot imagine passersby entering any of these shops, much less parting with substantial sums of money to purchase what she considers to be trinkets, items so grossly inflated in price as to seem comical, surely a confidence trick. She stops in front of a window display of oil paintings, images of emaciated dogs and sour-faced children, wives and husbands posed as if under threat of a gun. The wives – there are two paintings of couples – appear to her to be on the verge of speaking, uttering some kind of declaration, their mouths slightly open, beginning to taper at the sides.

The husbands she is more familiar with. Broad backs, large hands, bloated stomachs pressed against her. Visitor number nine. A suit the colour of the Channel on an overcast day. She remembers. No time even to remove his clothes, only the thrash and ecstasy of a busy man with a thousand secrets and commitments and places he ought to be instead of this room, with this woman, Louisa, legs splayed, thinking only of the crisp notes, and in exchange another ticket to nirvana. She smiles to herself. *They nicked me purse.*

An apparition is forming as she peers through the fog of her breath on the shop window. A ghostly presence swimming out of the ether, moving back, then forward, then seeming to come toward her in a rush. A man? No, a woman. Then the certainty of a man. The shopkeeper? Too late to draw away.

“Like to look around? Come in, come in.” He looks her up and down. An older man with a florid,

puffed up face. Jovial. “Feel free.” A face, she sees, overrun with tiny holes as if pecked mercilessly by ravenous miniature birds. She has a hunch he might be the owner or the artist, or both. A sensation of warmth envelopes her on the cold pavement, in continual waves.

“No, no,” she says. “I was just passing. Just looking.” She offers up a smile and turns to a painting so that at least he won’t feel diminished by the refusal. “I noticed these amazing dogs. They are so thin.”

“Hah,” the man says. “Lucy and Jasper. They’re gone now. Must be 10 years. More than that. But you’re right, they were amazing. Italian greyhounds, they are. Were. Terrific, terrific companions.”

Louisa nods, takes this in. She understands the warmth is from the shop’s interior. She is aware of time passing and the narrow window of her appointment but also the importance of politesse and conversation, the little increments that contribute to the abundance of life. Lucy and Jasper, still fond in the man’s heart, the miracle of meeting and establishing some sort of connection, however brief, the need to focus on the task ahead. All this she contemplates, and so she only nods and doesn’t speak. She continues to gaze at the dogs, as if in rapt attention to the detail in the painting, their sleek grey coats, a note of curiosity in their eyes, the background – which she is just now noticing – of a high burgundy chair in a room with what appear to be curved wood-panelled walls.

“Ah, well,” the man says. He reaches into his breast pocket. “Feel free to come in and browse if you like. Any time.” He hands her a business card and withdraws into the shop.

She glances back once more at the painting, and something of the effect of the closing door or a slight shift in the light has obscured the two dogs and instead there is only a woman staring at her. A woman in a wimple. Middle-aged. A small, unremarkable brown face. She exhales and watches the fog roll out and travel and settle against the window. 9:52.



And now she must move, hurry along, perhaps break into a run. Not so easy in a full-length habit. But she manages to skip past shops and houses and apartment buildings, scrubbed and impressive and grand. So different from the area where she is staying – the cheap hotel, the smell of boiled cabbage, children in the hallway, the racket at night.

She had melded the nighttime hotel noises with her dreams and the screams from the room on the first floor of the house they shared. Louisa, Becky, Sharon, the others. In the dream it was unmistakably Sharon who had cried out. And no matter how hard she tried to help her friend, Louisa could not move because of the man who had her pinned down. Still wearing the overcast suit, he glanced at his watch and spoke into his phone and rifled through his briefcase for something he seemed unable to locate. And when she tried to shout, to move, no sound issued and he remained deaf to her appeals. She woke in the little hotel to the sound of actual screeching, then laughter, both in the streets and in the room next door where guests were watching TV.

Years ago, Sharon had been beaten by a client, bloodied to the point of hospitalization, which in the end had been Louisa's salvation, and Sharon's too, although she didn't know it then. Louisa left for Spain less than six months after the episode even though the drugs, the drink, the need for crisp notes persisted. But everything became better after that, after the house was closed down and everyone scattered and Sharon returned to her childhood home, to her mother in Leeds, to heal, to repair the wounds that were not on the surface, wounds perhaps only a mother could soothe. That was Sharon. Sharon who used to ask, "What about you, Cocoa? Your family, your home?" For they had called her Cocoa then, on account of her skin – her friends, her colleagues, the suits too pressed for time to undress. Perhaps the sobriquet had made it easier, that life, the way she had lived then. As if everything had happened to another person, not to her. Louisa. Louise.

"My mother drowned when I was seven," she would always explain. One, four, six – the ages

varied. A father never on the scene to begin with, *except for the deed*, which is how she terminated those conversations. The prying eyes and curious minds, anxious to know something of her history, her past. Usually that was enough to halt them in their tracks. And who could be so callous as to continue to poke around, to interrogate to the outer limits? Most times that shut them up. She has her tricks.

"What a puzzle you are, Louisa," Constanza would say in the early days. Her sister, Constanza.

The abbess would hold up a hand to say, "In our own time, Constanza, the world comes to us. To each, in her own time." And Louisa would always be grateful for the intervention, never quite understanding the abbess's words.

Mansion blocks, immense and spotless, as if she has wandered into another city, a city free of pollution, free of the cacophony of crowds and traffic. Where the size of a home has little bearing on income. Not London. Not the playground of her youth, barely a 12-minute bus journey from here.

Then the bridge, the Thames, a smattering of anchored barges. She must skirt the river to reach her destination. Her heartbeat, the sheen on her face, perspiration seeping into her thin canvas shoes. It is not too late to turn around and walk away, in the direction she has come from. Back to Victoria Station, along the boundary of the palace grounds and Hyde Park, the Edgware Road, back to the budget hotel. Pack her bags and endure another restless night and tomorrow board the plane back home.

Months and months in front of the stammering, outmoded computer. Phone calls made. Addresses checked, money put aside. Sister Comfort cajoling. Comfort, Maria, Constanza working, hawking their glory pastries and *amarguillos* and ceramic bowls in the little market square so that she, Louisa, could return to this place, now, with her heart hammering against her chest in the winter sunshine, the glint of the river before her. 10:11.

She is running late by over 10 minutes and that gives her a kind of strength, a coward's courage, now that the risk has passed. Had she arrived 10 or even five minutes ago there might have been the danger of confrontation. There is guilt or there will be guilt at some later stage. She thinks of the goodwill behind her, abandoned because of her fear. She understands that she has engineered this failure with the stopping and starting, with indecision: the pause at the art shop, the conversation with the owner, the period of contemplation with the woman on the pavement. All designed to shave off seconds here, moments there, amounting to minutes.

She rounds the corner at a single house facing the river, a tall two-storey window splitting the building in two like a gash, and begins to saunter up the street, no longer pressed for time. Past other houses now and apartment blocks, some with a partial view, albeit at an angle, of the river. She counts the numbers – 69, 67 – in reverse order, approaching the address written on the slip of paper in her pouch. Sixty-three, 59. She pauses at 57. And waits. And loiters after all. All anxiety spent, no longer caring if she is noticed, wondered at. Queried.

Five minutes at least. Her sisters deserve that much for all their effort and encouragement. In the cold, facing the river, she waits. A building similar to the others along the street, a conundrum of dwellings, each with a protective balustrade beneath the windows. If she steps out into the street, perhaps crosses to the opposite pavement, she might have a better view of each apartment. She might be able to guess at a particular home.

Too late.

A home at least, a good home. A safe neighbourhood. Quiet wealth. No concerns about food on the table, resources, crisp banknotes. Louisa inhales, a deep winter blast of air into the lungs, and nods to herself and smiles. Enough.

Fingers beginning to numb, toes curling in their canvas enclosures, she begins to walk, and then launches into a sort of quickstep. She clasps her

hands for the warmth and thinks of Jerez, the children in the square, the men and women queuing to buy lemon donuts and fritters and Vienna cakes, the English classes she provides. Her little claps to gain attention or to praise.

Up the street she goes, further from the river, from the exclusive homes and closer to offices and shops and the hum of human traffic. Another row of boutiques, an Indonesian restaurant, an estate agents, a coffee shop – the Riverside Café, so far removed from the river at this point as to seem an intentional humour. She senses the warmth behind the café's steamed-up windows. What she desires most is a glass of water or tea, to sit for a few minutes and bow her head and perhaps rest and then move on.

A little bell announces her arrival and of course the customers turn to look – three workmen at a table devouring baguettes and sandwiches, two old women standing in front of the counter, contemplating, a man in an apron behind the counter pulling coffee from an espresso machine.

"Morning!" he calls, hardly turning. But he looks again. A young man, thin as a twig, prematurely aged by a manicured beard and oversized spectacles, an overblown moustache. She imagines what he might see; something worn out and dehydrated, dragged in from the cold, shrouded from head to toe in sackcloth, only a porthole surrounding her face. The perfect moment to deliver a smile, she feels, something to disarm him. Them. She doesn't smile. She doesn't respond to the greeting. Steam plumes from the coffee machine. She takes in the glare from the tables as the sun glances into the room, the framed photographs on the walls of deserts and seas and forests and one, it appears, of the solar system. The laminate floor beneath her feet is beginning to abrade in a narrow strip, from entrance to counter, leading directly to the two old women who are staring at her.

Necklaces and rings, fur-topped boots, and the unflinching gaze of the privileged. And there she is.

Liver spots and deep wrinkles, perhaps a squint. An old woman, glaring. Louisa looks her full in the face. She feels a quiet rage gathering within her, like something swallowed that the stomach must reject. Do you see me at all? Closer. Now? There.

Lemon donuts and macaroons and *amarguillos*, a bargain flight from there to here. And here you are. And you left me. Just like that.

But she says nothing, Louisa. She doesn't utter a word. And then she does smile even with the venom pooling inside her. How is it that a person can smile so much?

Louisa. Always sunny, like the summertime.

"Can I help you?" the woman says. Her mother says. And she hears that voice for the very first time. Not a hard voice, or indifferent or unkind. Just a voice. The quaver of an old woman, bewildered, frail. Perhaps afraid. And now she sees that the old woman isn't glaring after all.

All that rage, that poison, Louisa feels it draining away, and in its place comes something like panic. And all she can think of are the visits to nirvana and the nights of cold terror and the break-ins and the bodies pressed against her at any hour of the day, and how reduced she is becoming here, bit by bit, when she had intended something altogether different, something she can hardly recall.

"Can I help?" the old woman says again, and she looks to her friend, perhaps for assistance. Two old women, across the river from where she used to live in the south. All those years, within walking distance. What a puzzle everything is.

And now she must think, Louisa, after all this time she must be careful about the words she chooses. *This is me, Louise*, will not do.

"I am wondering," she says. She takes a moment. An older woman in a wimple and a brown habit and nothing to flaunt in her life except a narrow bed in a bare room and a few knick-knacks, two pairs of shoes. A pair of mauve flip-flops, which she loves.

Her sisters. She has her sisters. And the good Lord, of course.

She clenches her fingers, to maintain focus, to stop herself from fleeing, and feels the business card she has been holding all this time.

"I am wondering," she repeats. She looks down at the card. "Duncan Williams – Fine Art. Do you know which way it is?"

Failure.

Despite the chill, the February cold, she feels she is melting away, reduced to a puddle of nothing. She tries to gather herself up again into something resembling a human shape, and goes on. "I'm afraid I've missed me way. My way." Failure. Failure. Everything coming apart. *They nicked me purse*.

There is some shuffling, queries, pronouncements and rebuttals, until the barista announces, "If it's the one I'm thinking of, it's just on thingamajig street, the one right behind this one. Just next to it, if you get my meaning. Parallel."

"Oh good. Good." Louisa nods her thanks with a kind of effort, like pulling herself up from a swamp. She manages to smile, to beam beyond what she herself feels capable of. "Thank you so much," she says and turns to leave, hoping she can at least reach the door handle in one easy movement, and place one foot ahead of the other without stumbling, without falling to the ground in a heap. *My mother drowned when I was seven*, she will continue to claim, and leave it at that. So much simpler. Kinder. To herself. *What a puzzle you are*.

"Would you like some tea?" the woman says. The old woman who appears bewildered. Perhaps it is simply the way she looks. "Margaret and I, we were just settling down for some tea, weren't we? And scones." She looks out beyond the café's glass front for a moment. "And it is so cold today. You must join us before you go out again. Yes? Say yes." She says so with a diffident smile, a smile nonetheless, a glint in the eye, and Louisa observes a familiarity in the face, like something in a reflection. A little hard, but also fragile, with a history barricaded behind those penetrating eyes. Perhaps her world arriving, eventually, coming to her in its own good time.

# FEARS ARE PAPER TIGERS

KERRY GILBERT

amelia, where did your bones go

did they have the free fall of plane and air  
or the soft float sink of body and water or  
the erosion of an open grave

island animals your congregation  
did you have time to lament  
to build a lean-to, to keep off the rain

to drink water from a folded leaf  
or did your heart drop into your throat  
just long enough to feel you were alive

once you flew, you really flew  
did you know they wouldn't know  
whether the bones were yours

the length and density of them  
much, much more like a man's  
and that's really it, isn't it

these things that divide us  
that we shed our skin to overcome  
when ultimately a bone is a bone

you come to me at 5 a.m., fragments  
of stress signals and voice, because you  
know it's the best time to get through

so much silence. so much white space  
even your bones aren't allowed to speak  
for themselves. i prefer to picture you

with the peaceful sway of 18,000 feet  
under the pacific instead, because even  
then the violence of water invading lungs

seems more natural, because even then  
the muted popping sound of parrot fish  
feeding on your bones is your own morse

code of the rest of your story untold  
i hear you amelia, i really do and in my mind  
i plant breadfruit trees near all your graves

there are these pivotal moments that  
change our trajectory—the fly-float-

fall of when we can see so acute  
faster than the speed of sound—

was 1904 that moment for you  
when you built a roller-coaster style

ramp from the roof of the toolshed  
made a wooden box cart with uncle

that flew off rather than slid down  
you emerged from expectation

broken wood. a bruised lip. torn  
dress. *oh, pidge, it's just like flying*



in order to really, truly fly

your skin would need to be stretched  
so thin, to reach the torque, the tip

the balance. bones shaped by wind  
but, *oh, pidge*, that body would climb

zoom, 45 bank, stall, vertical bank  
glide, dive 38 spiral, tailspin, side

slip, split 's' turn, forward slip  
barrel roll, loop inside, loop outside

until all that is left is debris on a beach  
—they wonder, wonder if it is yours

i have an image—while you fly low  
after the radio cuts out, after the engines

cut out, in those seconds of glide  
a trade wind turns you around and

you are carried on the backs of  
hundreds of crows back to papua

new guinea. there, the locals circle  
you like a womb, they circle your

neck with flowers. electra rests in the  
jungle, overgrows with a green vine

that the children can climb. in  
circle stories, at night, around fire

you tell the young girls about places  
you have been, spin beautiful poetic

phrases into the sky. you tell them  
about records you broke, about books

you wrote, about birth control and  
the vote. you teach them how to fly

birds carry story fragments and ash  
circumnavigate the globe and drop

their feathers in backyards around  
the world, where for the past 80

years children climb into makeshift  
planes and pretend they are you

# SORCERER

MATTHEW HEITI



Illustration by Alex Tihonov/Shutterstock

It was two minutes to close when the kid brought the old Sekine into the shop. The bike was so badly mangled Griff laughed and said, What happened? Did Gojira get a hold of it? But the kid just shrugged. He didn't seem to be a connoisseur of Japanese monster movies.

Griff clamped the bike into his workstand. A 10-speed. It had been a beaut. Early '70s most likely. He could tell by the little details: the plastic gemstone in the badge at the front of the bike, the chrome lugs, pantographed curves where the high-tensile steel tubes were joined. Griff wiped his hands on his shop apron before he touched it. It was like handling the relics of a saint. It was that kind of bike.

But the rear stays had been so badly twisted he wasn't sure if he could get the wheel off without a hacksaw. And the rim itself was curled up like a potato chip.

The kid stood off to the side, eyes on the bike. Griff looked him over. No bruises, no cuts. No blood.

Where'd you get the bike, he asked.

The kid just shrugged again and rubbed at his nose. He wouldn't make eye contact. He was about nine, 10 maybe. Griff was useless when it came to children. His sister Nance had yelled when she walked in on him and the twins watching *Ghidora, the Three-Headed Monster*. They're seven, she said when she finally got them to bed. You're gonna traumatize them. I was that old and I'm fine, he said. No, you're not, you're a weirdo, she said. Weirdo was the word Nance used for unwed, childless people over 30.

Probably stole it, Griff thought, walking around to the other side of the bike and looking at the kid through the spokes. He was wearing blue gym shorts, a stained Molson I Am Canadian T-shirt, so baggy he was almost swallowed by it. His hair was long, but not stylishly so. Maybe the kid was older than he'd thought. Twelve. Just short for his age. The bike was way too big for him, that was for sure. He could be a thief. But so could anyone. Griff took a mental note to write down the serial number of the bike.

I'll see what I can do with it in the morning, he said, untying the apron, but the kid didn't budge. He kept on staring at the bike.

I don't have time tonight, he lied. You'll have to leave it here.

Then like an animal bolting from the side of the road, the kid jumped forward and tried to wrench the bike out of the stand. He almost pulled the whole thing over before Griff grabbed him by the wrist. The kid yanked back, crouching down and turning his head away like he was waiting to be hit. Some kind of small whimpering sound came out of him.

Whoa, Griff said, holding both hands up, It's okay, it's okay.

But then he could smell it. A small puddle formed underneath the kid's feet.

Neither of them said anything about it. Griff just went quietly behind the counter and got a shop rag, already covered in grease. He dragged a stool over for the kid while he wiped the floor.

He wanted to tell the kid that there were some things you can't help. Sometimes you just need to let go. But the words got stuck in the back of his throat like the small bones of a fish. He let the kid wipe at his eyes and said nothing.

When he tossed the rag in the garbage he went back to the bike and started to work. He threw on an old VHS tape in a set above the counter. *Destroy All Monsters*. He kept the sound off while he worked.

It wasn't the first time he stayed late at the shop. There was a cot in the back room for the nights

when he lost track of time. He might be truing a wheel, hypnotized as it spun round and round. Sometimes the silence here was better than the silence waiting for him at home.

He was able to get the wheel off without too much trouble. It needed to be replaced, of course, and the skewer with it. That was no problem. He scavenged the parts off an old Fuji he was rebuilding for himself. But the frame itself was bugged. Normally when someone brought in a bike in this condition, he'd suggest scrapping it. Even if he got it looking right, structurally the damage had been done. One shock, a big bump, and the frame could crack in two. He'd sell the customer something new and shiny. It's what most of them really wanted anyway.

But he knew enough here that the kid wouldn't allow it with the Sekine. He kept on looking at that bike like it was his only friend in the world.

He never threw those old frames out. The back room was full of them. Skeletons hanging from the rafters. Some of them were far past hope, but he still couldn't bring himself to junk them. He had repair manuals piled all around the shop. Your grimoires, Nance called them. Like he was some kind of sorcerer. Bringing bikes back to life.

He wrapped a rag around the frame to protect the paint and then wedged a two-by-four in between the stays. Working slowly, one side, the other and back again, he bent the metal back into shape. He lived within the space of millimetres.

He talked to the kid as he worked. Naming the parts as he pointed them out, explaining how each one functioned. How they all connected to the bigger machine. This was his way of storytelling. Nance complained because when he put the twins to bed, he'd read to them from the *Big Blue Book*, his favourite bicycle repair manual. Why can't you read them something normal like a fairy tale, she'd yell. This puts them to sleep, he said. But he guessed the real reason was he just didn't like anything with an ending.



On the TV set, Mothra was tossed back against a skyscraper by Gigan. Flames exploded from the cardboard building as it toppled. The title told it all: the monsters would be destroyed. But like in all true Kaijū films, the monster would always come back. Cities would always be rebuilt.

When he first opened the shop, 10 years earlier, he tried holding classes on Saturday mornings. But just like his community ride idea, only a handful of people showed up. It had been little daily beatings like this always. Hairline fissures in the iceberg. He shortened the hours on the sign, but spent more time in the shop. He never bothered to hire any help until he was past helping. He made enough to almost pay the bills.

When he finally pulled the two-by-four out, the sun was pooling where the piss had stained the cement floor. The kid was leaning against the wall with his head lowered, arms crossed.

He got the new wheel on, checked the tire pressure. Then he spent another half hour tightening, lubing and adjusting. If you plucked a brake cable it would sing. Pride in his work wouldn't allow less.

He wiped it down and stepped back. It was a real beaut. No one would be able to tell it had been a wreck. Even the pearl gold paint seemed to shine. It was clear somebody used to care for the bike.

He made enough noise getting the bike out of the clamp and banging it to the ground, so he wouldn't have to shake the kid awake. The VHS tape jammed in the machine. Gojira was caught in the moment of his downfall.

The kid slid off the stool. He came over to the bike, but if he was impressed by the result, he didn't say anything about it.

He reached for the bullhorns, but Griff kept one hand on the seat, not ready to let go.

That wheel looked like somebody drove a car back and forth over it, a few times, Griff said.

The kid didn't respond. He ran one hand down the length of the top tube, like he was petting a dog. You need me to call someone, Griff said. The kid shook his head.

Your mom, he said, Your dad? Right there. He thought he'd tuned into a frequency, just for moment. Maybe a slight wince from the kid when he said the word. He bent down, one knee cracking, so his head was at the same height as the kid's. Finally, their eyes met.

He'd sat like this at the edge of Nance's hospital bed. She looked fine. He told her so. I feel great, she said, but her laugh was like broken glass.

What about more surgery, he'd said. What about more pills? What about more treatments?

I've had enough, she said. He'd sat in on all her appointments, closing the shop whenever he needed to. He wrote down all the exercises, instructions and guidelines. He collected the pamphlets. He got books out from the library.

She looked fine. But her eyes were just like the kid's right now. A kind of broken he couldn't fix. He could assemble a bicycle from nothing, but with people he was useless.

There was no manual to show him. He stopped going to the hospital. Now the twins were living with his parents up the highway. He'd called but he hadn't been over. Soon, he'd told his mother.

Griff looked away and stood up. He let go of the bike. He didn't ask for any money, and the kid didn't offer to pay. He took a helmet down from the wall. Shiny blue beetle shell. He had to press it into the kid's hands so that he would take it.

He watched him leave through the big windows at the front of the shop. The sun was dying somewhere at the end of road. Every day it was the same.

The kid had to stand on one pedal and it took him a few tries, but he eventually got up on the saddle, wobbling back and forth as he pedalled a lazy circle in front of the shop before heading off down the street. He wasn't rushing and there was still plenty of time for Griff to run out onto the road and yell for him to come back.

He told himself there were no bruises, no cuts. No blood. He did all he could with the bike. It was fixed. It might hold together. It looked fine from here.

# HOSPICE

DAVID LAMPE

*Hospice – a place to pause on your journey.* —WILMA NEWBERRY  
*What I do trust is mystery, I trust confusion.* —JENNIFER CHANG

We confuse—  
in this age of high tech,  
of labour-saving  
  
devices that waste time,  
keep us from  
silence and solitude—

the two terms  
“hospice”  
and “hospital.”

Though syllable  
cousins there’s  
powerful

difference between  
a frantic  
emergency room

(a too often  
necessary place, alas)  
and a quiet

hospice room  
where we  
wait,

a pause  
in the clock  
on our journey.

1

I experience  
all these  
confusions

when Ruth  
completes  
her crossing

8 a.m.  
August 8  
2015.

2

I had never been  
present at the death  
of anyone I loved—

my father suffered  
a sudden  
nocturnal heart attack,

my mother slipped away  
as I was driving to  
reach her,

a hundred  
miles away.  
But, thank God,

I was with Ruth  
for those last  
moments of mystery.

3

My medievalist friend,  
Judson Allen,  
a PK from Tennessee,

the last time  
I saw him told me,  
“I could almost

thank God for  
my cancer since  
it gave me time

to prepare  
an answer.”  
To what?

For whom?  
I was at a loss.  
But after piecing

together final plans  
with Ruth, I began  
to understand.

“I’m not afraid of death,”  
she said. “It’s just  
getting there that’s scary.”



4

Those last moments  
were hard—  
her staggered

breathing, the dry  
retch—they were  
desperately hard.

Morphine did not  
help *kommst du*  
*süsse Todesstunde*.

5

Despite Bach's pietistic  
plea or later  
overblown Germanic angst

it was sweet  
and bitter at best.  
Sweet since

she had avoided  
the indignities  
of cancer—

incontinence, in-  
coherence,  
intolerable pain—

bitter for me since  
I had lost the love  
and centre of my life.

6

So now when  
asked,  
“How are you?”

I respond,  
“Fine.”—  
a white lie

unless I  
detect  
true concern.

Then I say  
I often cry  
when reminded

of Ruth  
by a chance word  
overheard,

by a perfume  
that brings her  
scent back to me.

I fall to weeping,  
and weep,  
and weep

and Oh...

Even Our House Mourns

I know it’s a “pathetic fallacy”  
to impose our emotions  
on the world around us,

that it’s an unreliable  
subjective response  
to our surroundings,

even more particularly  
to the house my wife and  
I lived in for 45 years.

There certainly must be  
some rational explanation  
for the strange events

of this last month—  
the electrified  
*Gone with the Wind*

lamp that fell to the floor,  
shattering into  
fragments after

20 years of subdued  
light in the corner.  
Or the sudden

rush of water  
from the third-floor  
radiator that brought

down the ceiling  
in our bedroom.  
I know that old houses

don’t shed tears,  
don’t throw things  
crashing to the floor.

These are human responses,  
the things I would do,  
not the house.

Yet it seems to have  
a will and pain  
of its own.

I foolishly thought  
that after her death  
the house

and the pain  
were mine  
and mine alone.



# MY FIVE

## CHASING MEMORIES

JANICE JOHNSON



### 1. MEMORY

In 1964, dad moved the family from the small town of Moncton, New Brunswick, to the “big city” of Montreal. En route, at a rest stop, mom with a camera in hand, took a picture of me and my brother, Terry, sitting on a pony, and my brothers, Roger and Chuck, holding the reins. There we are. It’s only a snapshot, but there we are, on an adventure, marked for memory. My memory.

Dad moved up the business ladder, becoming a top executive in a telecommunication company. We were a solid, predictable, middle-class family when there was such a thing. Dad, the provider, had to travel – he liked to travel; mom took care of the household and the kids, and in 1967 we got a surprise centennial baby, Bob, the youngest by seven years in the family.

Dad was absent a lot. I remember when my father was gone, I would sit at my little desk, creating little stories in my mind. My mother’s photo albums created stories for me. I loved my mother’s snapshot albums and I loved little stories. Maybe they filled an absence.

### 2. CHAPTERS

In fact, I’ve always believed that life is a story book. Memory moments are chapters, each chapter, as you remember it, shapes you. In 1971, dad moved the family again. I began my high school years in Toronto, interested in Art, Art History, History, and the different Religions. I spent hours at the library – I loved to learn, but never dreamed I’d be an artist. I didn’t know any artists. I didn’t know what other artists did. After high school, I met my husband and I was blessed with three beautiful daughters. However, after 13 years, I lost my soulmate. He sank into alcohol addiction. I decided I had to become a single parent: now, life would be financial hardship.

In 1992, I entered the two-year social work program at Sheridan College, Oakville, and graduated with honors. I worked for a time in a group home where we taught teens social skills. But, I soon found I needed to take on a second job: as a housekeeper. Housekeeping became my main source of income. As I entered each private space with a mop, a pail, and a vacuum cleaner, I realized that behind each door, each window, there is a story – and each story has to be admired and respected.

These stories, as I came across them and remembered them, remained a mystery to me. I was, I decided, engaged in a different kind of social work.

### 3. LIFE, LOSS, REBIRTH

In 2005, I entered a five-year relationship which abruptly ended in betrayal, lies, and deception. He became abusive and dangerous. I had no secret world to escape to. I, however, needed to make plans to escape. As things turned out, ironically, my world became a dark room in my mind.

In 2012, my brother, Terry, who had sat with me on the pony, nearly died. He needed me in this fight to stay alive. I braved out of my hole. I was constantly by his side. The doctors saved his life and called him a walking miracle. But later that year, we lost my brother, Chuck, to drug addiction. One brother was saved, and another taken. I sat at my desk, eyes closed, reflecting on what used to make me happy. Opening my eyes, I noticed the new camera I’d bought a few years before. I’d never taken it out of the box. Looking out the window with a broken heart, I noticed that it was a sunny fall day, a day full of light. I let the camera charge for a few hours and then drove to the different parks along Lake Ontario. I had no idea what I was doing or what I was seeing – but I was, in my own way, travelling. Filling the absence.

### 4. OPEN YOUR EYES

In life, you encounter certain people, and they can change your life by changing the way you look at things. I was walking to my car after taking pictures and I encountered an old man in the parking lot who was wearing a Nikon around his neck and he had a tripod in hand. We began by comparing cameras. I told him that I really had no idea what I was doing. He said, “Young lady, never mind with all that technology. Do you know what I paid for this camera here? I paid 40 dollars at a second-hand shop.” Then, “All you have to do is open your eyes.” I shook his hand and wished him well. I muttered on the way to the car: “What does he mean by open your eyes?”

I began going out with my camera more and more, and took pictures of everything and anything. On one of my trips I looked up to the clear blue sky, like I was seeing it for the first time – just like



when I stood on top of Mount Uludağ in Bursa, Turkey, in 1996, blue sky as far as I could see. That was the moment when my eyes could see again, the moment when, magically, I came out of my dark room. I began to chase sunsets so I could capture comfort and tranquility. I began to travel my home country roads, capturing abandoned houses and barns. This triggered my imagination, conjuring up the lives that once had their presence between those walls. I remembered Bo-Jangles, a horse I once owned, a horse who loved to hear my stories in her stall every night. I began to understand what that wise old man meant. He meant having an open heart, opening your eyes, because it's only with the heart that you can capture the feelings attached to what you see.

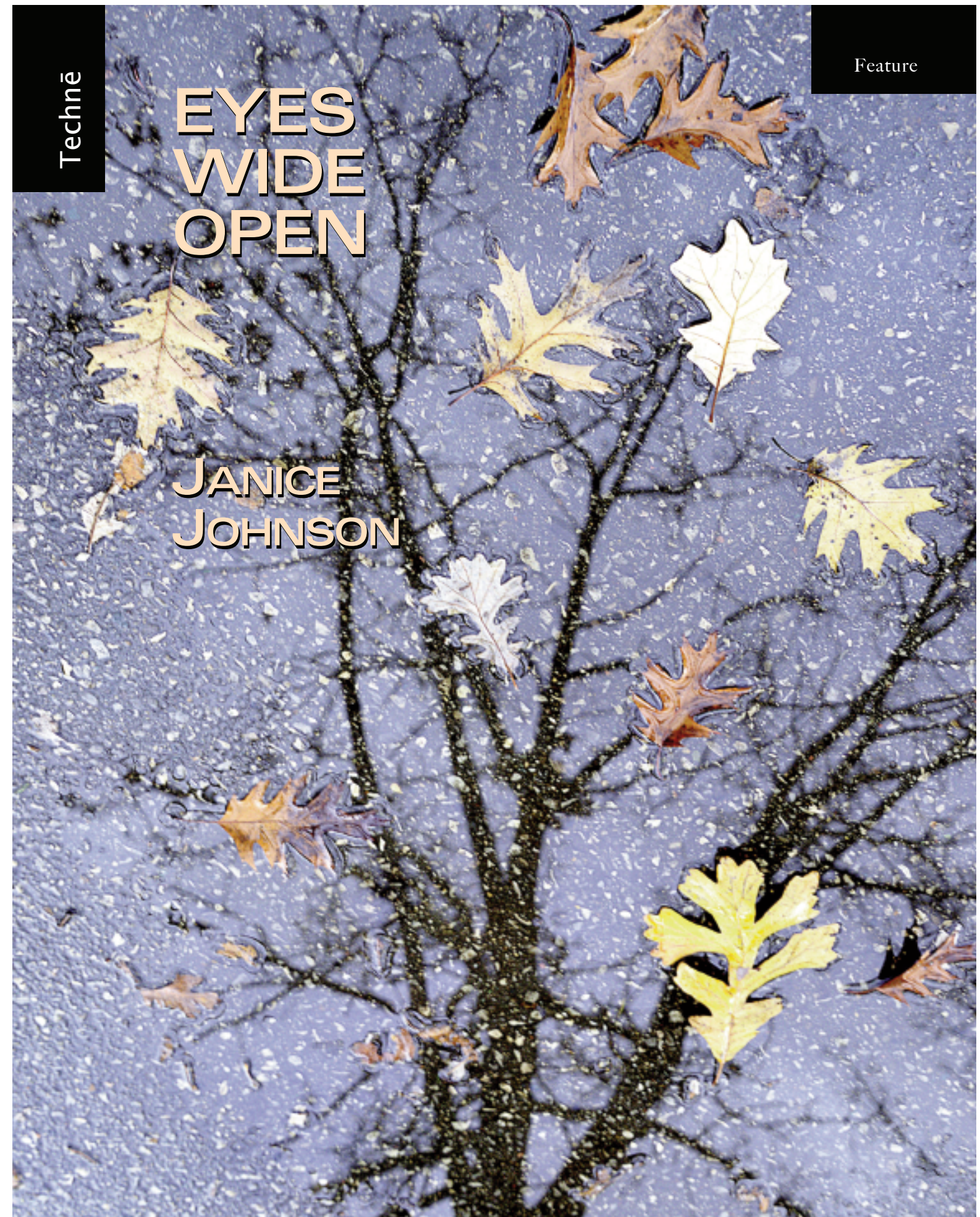


## 5. COMPANION AND BEST FRIEND

My camera is my travelling companion, my best friend – just like the wind-up musical doll I'd played with as a four year old had been my best friend. I went on Social Media to let people see what I called my “captures.”

An artist whose house I cleaned, a wise woman herself, once looked at my photographs and told me I had a natural eye for framing. I'd never thought of framing. I just fixed my eye on what I saw, one eye narrowed yet eyes wide open. “There are snapshots,” she said, “and then there's how you frame what you see and what you see is your own vision of things.” I'd certainly never thought myself as a visionary, but then one day I took a picture of a moment in time in a rain pool, and that same wise woman said, “There you are, you've got a whole new series: ‘Life in a Puddle.’” Adding, “There's a Russian novelist who said: ‘We don't drown in an ocean, we drown in a puddle.’ Now you are a visionary photographer.”

It's hard to know how all this has happened, this way of seeing, this way of filling the absences, particularly when I think I still pretty much look at life from the back of a pony.















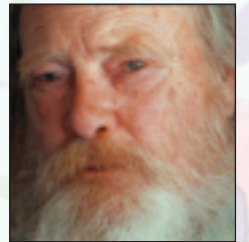
## Contributors

## FEATURES & ENCOUNTERS

### WORD & ART: RIFFS ON RIFFS

**HAYDEN CARRUTH** (d. 2008) was an American poet and literary critic best known for his jazz-influenced style and for works that explore mental illness – much of which is an examination of the ordinary expressed in a variety of restrained and tightly controlled forms (*Brothers, I Loved You All* (1978), often considered his best work, uses imagery and rhythms from jazz). Carruth's volumes of collected poems include *North Winter*, *For You*, *Almanach du Printemps Vivarois*, *Lighter than Air Craft*, *Sonnets*, and *Scrambled Eggs and Whiskey: Poems, 1991–1995*, *Doctor Jazz* and *Toward the Distant Islands*.

photo University of Chicago



**HANANYA GOODMAN** is an Israeli librarian, educator, artist, and an asemic writer – a subset of abstract art emphasizing imaginary languages and calligraphy, through which he has invented over ten thousand characters and/or ideographs used for his personal language. Goodman's asemic aspirations also share in the inventiveness, spontaneity, and personal world-creation of jazz – in this sense, his paintings, like those featured in this issue's lead-off section, express private and social visceral emotions, as well as complex cogitations.

facebook.com/hananya.goodman/photos\_by



### MY FIVE/TECHNĒ: CHASING MEMORIES/EYES WIDE OPEN



**JANICE JOHNSON** was born in Moncton, New Brunswick, and has lived in Brampton, Ontario, for two decades. Her photographs have appeared in three issues of *EXILE Quarterly* – with authors Barry Callaghan, Norman Snider, and Bruce Meyer – as well as throughout the Canadian edition of Anne Michaels and John Berger's book, *Railtracks*. Her portraits of Ontario musicians Mike Williams and David Flack were used on their respective CD covers. She has taken part in a few group shows, and one-woman shows in Hamilton and Mississauga, Ontario.

Her photos are displayed at Robertson Fine Arts Studio & Gallery in Brantford, Ontario.

facebook.com/janicejohnsonPhotography jantopmops@hotmail.com

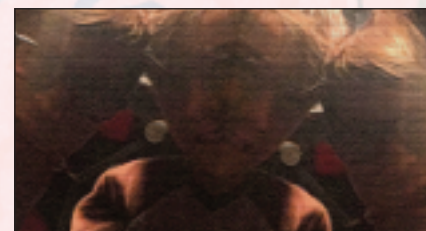
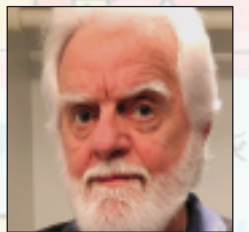
photo by Wally Stemberger

### THE ACERBIC EYE: LAUGHTER CORRECTS ABUSE

**TERRY MOSHER** (a.k.a. Aislin) of Montreal is often called Canada's nastiest political cartoonist. Over the course of his career he has frequently appeared as a commentator on many of Canada's major television and radio programs, and is also a regular speaker on the topics of humour, history, and the importance of cartooning as a communications tool.

aislin.com

photo by Terry Mosher



### GRAVITAS: INTRODUCING

**KOUGIS MONROE + BESSIN MGUU** are a visual and video arts duo who live in the middle of nowhere, at the centre of the universe. These untitled Copic markers on paper drawings are their first published works.

photo by Mishi Uroboros



# PROSE & POETRY

RAY ROBERTSON is the author of nine novels, four collections of non-fiction, and a book of poetry. His work has been translated into several languages. Born and raised in Chatham, Ontario, he lives in Toronto.



GEORGE ELLIOTT CLARKE was born in Windsor, Nova Scotia, and currently resides in Toronto. He is a revered artist in song, drama, fiction, screenplay, essays, and poetry, and was the 4th Poet Laureate of Toronto (2012-15) and the 7th Parliamentary/Canadian Poet Laureate (2016-17). He has published 25 poetry “projects,” and his oeuvre has attracted many honours, including a Governor General’s Award for Poetry, a National Magazine Gold Medal for Poetry, the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Achievement Award, and appointments to the Order of Nova Scotia and to the Order of Canada at the rank of Officer. His newest work is a poignant and trenchant manifesto on “Kancel Kultur” and injustice, *J’Accuse...!* (*Poem versus Silence*).

portrait by Melanie Janisse

MADELEINE SONIK of Victoria, British Columbia, is a multi-genre writer and anthologist. Her latest book of fiction, *Fontainebleau*, is a linked story collection. Her latest nonfiction book, *Queasy*, is forthcoming. [madelinesonik.com](http://madelinesonik.com)

photo by Dyana Sonik-Henderson



SEGUN AFOLABI was born in Kaduna, Nigeria, and now lives in London, U.K. His novel, *Goodbye Lucille*, won the Authors’ Club Best First Novel Award in the U.K. His short story collection, *A Life Elsewhere*, was shortlisted for the Commonwealth Writers’ Prize and longlisted for the Frank O’Connor International Short Story Award. Afolabi was awarded the Caine Prize for African Writing in 2005 and was shortlisted for the same in 2015.

photo by Barney Jones

KERRY GILBERT has three published books of poetry: (*kerplnk*): *a verse novel of development*, *Tight Wire*, and *Little Red*. Gilbert has won the Gwendolyn MacEwen Poetry Award for Best Suite and has been shortlisted for ReLit, for the Ralph Gustafson Prize for the Best Poem, for the Pacific Spirit Poetry Contest, and for the Gwendolyn MacEwen Poetry for Best Suite.

photo by Camillia Courts



MATTHEW HEITI was born in a meteor crater. He has published a novel, *The City Still Breathing*, and a play, *Black Dog: 4 vs the wrld*. His short fiction has appeared in many publications, winning several awards including the Carter V. Cooper Short Fiction Award for Emerging Writer, and *Grain Magazine’s* Short Fiction award. He teaches English and Creative Writing at Laurentian University.

photo by Gerry Kingsley



DAVID LAMPE, born and bred on the prairies, home dweller in a Rust Belt border town, is a people’s poet, readily understood, a tribune of our common humanity, a teller of truth close to the bone.

photo by Jeff Lampe