



[Alternate Route]

Issue 10 – Summer 2023





# [Alternate Route]

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Thank you for reading!

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## Glimpses of Childhood

- I. For reasons unknown to me, I have no baby pictures. All the pics I've ever seen of myself were from age 3 and up.
- II. I love the two flat of my Grandparents on 87<sup>th</sup> Place. Though now only my Grandfather is there.
- III. When I dream of Robert Taylor Homes (Childhood home) right before I go to the elevator I always check the mailbox.
- IV. The place where I grew up had piss-fragranced hallways in the summer and in winter artworks of frozen spit on the elevator panels.

## Mental Truth

He'll reap just what he sows.  
Not seeing the harvest now.  
It is veering on the road,  
through each passing day.

He's going to reap just what he sows.  
A pound of dirt on his lungs for  
each deception, stolen glance  
and mile his fingers roamed on  
unfamiliar, nameless skin.

He's going to weep at what he's sown.  
Upon vision at the damage he's caused.  
And the price he'll pay,  
beneath a sign the reads  
"No exchanges, No returns."  
He's going to reap just what he sows.



## Q Villanelle

Colored shopping currency,  
abounding from sources galore;  
pieces designed to save.

I started using them sometime last year,  
maybe in the spring.  
Colored shopping currency.

Only had a few at first.  
That I kept forgetting to bring with me.  
Pieces designed to save.

Started eyeing the flyers:  
Wednesday for groceries, Sunday for drugstores.  
Colored shopping currency.

Next, linking sales with coupons.  
Seemingly impossible but could be done.  
Colored shopping currency.

The binder filled, then flowed with them.  
In a big cd wallet, sections expanded 3x over.  
Pieces designed to save.



Canadian poet/fiction writer/playwright

**J. J. Steinfeld**

lives on Prince Edward Island, where he is patiently waiting for Godot's arrival and a phone call from Kafka. While waiting, he has published 24 books, including *An Unauthorized Biography of Being* (Stories, Ekstasis Editions, 2016), *Absurdity, Woe Is Me, Glory Be* (Poetry, Guernica Editions, 2017), *A Visit to the Kafka Café* (Poetry, Ekstasis Editions, 2018), *Gregor Samsa Was Never in The Beatles* (Stories, Ekstasis Editions, 2019), *Morning Bafflement and Timeless Puzzlement* (Poetry, Ekstasis Editions, 2020), *Somewhat Absurd, Somehow Existential* (Poetry, Guernica Editions, 2021), *Acting on the Island* (Stories, Pottersfield Press, 2022), and *As You Continue to Wait* (Poetry, Ekstasis Editions, 2022).

## **.What Would Sisyphus Have to Say?**

I'm willing to bet  
dollars to doughnuts  
that one of us doesn't exist  
not in the conventional way  
laughing and crying  
and getting lost  
far too easily.

Who would win the bet?—  
magical words disguised as mediocrity  
longing to be mythical more or less  
on a night with a undiscovered moon  
yearning to be discovered less or more  
and you and I wind up  
arguing about the difference  
between longing and yearning.

And a platitude as big  
as all get out  
but hard as a rock

lands on your head  
I don't laugh or cry  
I know it's Sisyphus's rock  
or is it Sisyphus's stone  
you're bleeding too badly  
to argue coherently  
about the difference  
between a rock and a stone.

## Sisyphus Requests His Rock Returned

I purchased Sisyphus's rock for what's left of my devotion  
rolled it home through the encumbered traffic and onlookers  
strained my shoulder and pulled a muscle  
had a crisis of faith and a faithful crisis  
all in all, the soul's exertion touching the eternal  
not that the eternal weighs heavily on my thoughts  
I almost understood what it felt like to displease  
the creator of this cobbled together bewilderment  
on my tongue I received the smallest taste of the possibility  
of nothingness embraced and significance discarded.

Suddenly I hear a clapping of hands  
not applause but a request  
and I sing a half-hearted song  
as if my life depended on imperfection:

*I give up*

*I gave up*

*I start to imagine beginning another time  
and yet another time*

*I hide*

*I hid*

*I start to imagine reappearing another time  
and yet another time...*

Sisyphus requests his rock returned  
then makes a fist-clenched demand.  
As for me, I'm getting used to the pushing  
and what passes as singing.

## From My Window I See the Mythic Rock-Pusher Outside the Myth

From my window I see him  
and his mountain  
painted into my mind  
day after day  
grappling with endlessness  
muscular hard workouts  
the rock existing for him

long push up  
the roll down  
bad weather good forecasts irrelevant  
only the pushing  
thinking about pushing  
becoming the pushing  
as the deeply in love  
become the loving

I tap at the window  
I call out  
whistle loudly



no response

such utter concentration

such loving

I weep with admiration

as for me, I simply hurl pebbles into the sea

retrieve them

and hurl again

pushing metaphors is a thankless task

from my window

I see the mythic rock-pusher

outside the myth.

*Acknowledgements*

1) "What Would Sisyphus Have to Say?" from *Morning Bafflement and Timeless Puzzlement* (Ekstasis Editions, 2020) by J. J. Steinfeld.

2) "Sisyphus Requests His Rock Returned" from *Absurdity, Woe Is Me, Glory Be* (Guernica Editions, 2017) by J. J. Steinfeld.

3) "From My Window I See the Mythic Rock-Pusher Outside the Myth" from *A Visit to the Kafka Café* (Ekstasis Editions, 2018) by J. J. Steinfeld.





# Toppling

I confess I have erected barricades,  
have torn barricades down,  
knelt under tear gas, crawled on asphalt,  
have become claustrophobic  
at the sight of billowing fog,  
my hand stretched forward  
searching for a wall.

I've given breads and jams  
and canned goods, enough  
wood to make a blockade,  
blankets and books and black t-shirts,  
yet still you want bullets  
and guns, alcohol, fertilizer,  
and gasoline with matches to light.

I've given you flowers,  
and gallons of milk to soften the gas,  
I've given you placards  
of love and of freedom,  
yet still you want bricks  
and bottles and torn cloth.

I've given you darkness

to light, and lightness to darken.

I've given you beds

to use for everything but rest.

I've given you signs to warn

without chants of harm.

I've given, but you come

only to take, so when you are ready

to build, take me,

I'm giving my hands like a stirrup

and my knee like a bench

so you may rise above

what you've knocked down,

to shape the skyline of your future.

## Wool Coat

I face it:

I'm old, white, and male.

I'm not an immigrant but itinerant--

I have moved twenty-two times in my life.

I'm not urban.

I'm not a victim

and rarely have been victimized.

I'm not suburban and not quite rural.

I have no metropolitan standing

on which to speak

and prefer the infirm footing

of a trail or road or sandbar

that can shift by morning.

I'm not academic

but not self-taught.

If anything, I'm a burden

that needs to be thrown off,

a past century, an old diction,

not nostalgia but a heavy sentiment,

like an old wool coat

that's gone heavy in the rain.

When you slam,  
I can be your old wool coat,  
the one you cannot give away,  
the thick comfort when the past  
comes up like a wind  
from all directions and warmth  
deserts you like a feckless friend.  
By morning, I'll be the one who remains.  
I can encourage.  
The rain will bring scents  
of good will, a Salvation Army post  
of donated clothes  
when a river rose  
to take for a few days  
what embankments denied,  
a college student  
without a heated room  
where the sun never shone  
who slept in it,  
a veteran who pitched  
to the slough of the sea  
while on dry land

and never gained his feet,  
and me, scraping coins  
together for music  
and day-old bread  
for toast drunk on tea,  
Nietzsche and James Joyce  
attending college some days  
and some days not,  
gathered inside the coat  
the width of a pole  
needing the heavy ballast  
to keep my sanity  
from blowing away.

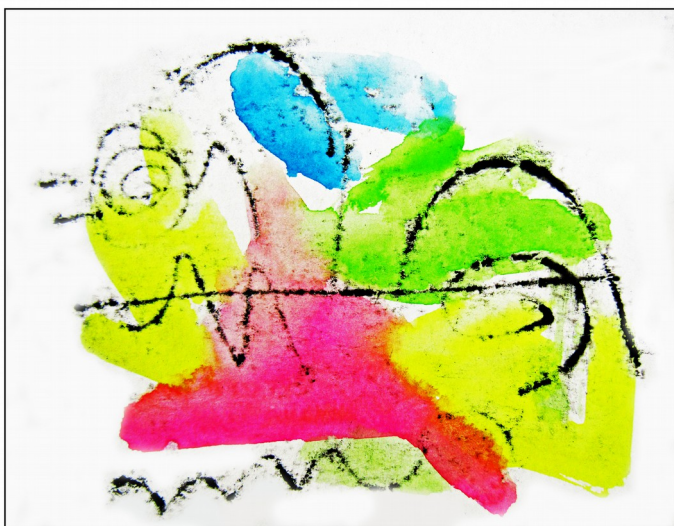
As you make the future,  
I can cover you.  
I can offer protection  
when you fight the wind,  
as you must.  
I can have your back.





**Michael Moreth**

is a recovering Chicagoan living in the rural,  
micropolitan City of Sterling, the Paris of Northwest  
Illinois.



*Welcoming*



*Xyresic*



*Zardozi*



Artisan baker by trade,

**Alfredo Salvatore Arcilesi**

has been published in over 80 literary journals worldwide. Winner of the Scribes Valley Short Story Writing Contest, he was a Pushcart Prize nominee, and twice nominated for Sundress Publications' Best of the Net. In addition to several short pieces, he is currently working on his debut novel.

## PLASTIC BREATH

After seven days of intolerable confinement, Izzy decided that this foggy afternoon was the right time to free herself. And, if she could manage, Clara.

She had been testing her crippled body since the morning darkness, inundating her extremities with signals to flex, and, with any hard-earned luck, *move*. Her weak arms appeared up to the task; she guessed her weight to be just shy of one-hundred pounds. Her legs, however, remained stubborn, anchoring her to the bed. For all the training she had subscribed to these counter-parts, none was more rigorous, more vital than her breathing regimen.

Izzy's relationship with oxygen had always been of a toxic nature. A university athlete who had relied upon her immaculate lungs for victory, it had been an unreliable ankle that decided ten metres from an important finish line was the time to snap, end her career, sink her into the depths of depression, and enrol her in a new, lifelong sport: smoking. Three packs a day, four when she was feeling particularly good (or bad), for fifty years.

And now the ghosts of cigarettes past were preventing her, in spite of her cooperative arms, from liberating herself, and, more importantly, Clara.

Izzy exhaled a laboured breath, painfully inhaled another. She should have been accustomed to it by now, but the air filtering throughout her sanctuary still tasted as artificial as it smelled. She felt the rather stale intake race through her mouth and nostrils, hoping to reach the pair of black bags that kept her going for no real purpose.

Save for Clara.

The clean dose of oxygen reached her ashen lungs, then exited her mouth and nose in another laboured exhalation. Izzy imagined the polluted molecules warning the new wave of respiration about what corruption lay within her.

She looked to her right, locked eyes with the never-blinking Clara, and, with a look that said “Don't you dare move now”—she couldn't risk precious breaths on her roommate's deaf ears—began the arduous journey.

Izzy watched as she willed her right arm across the centimetres that felt like kilometres of bed. The feeble limb



made pitiful progress before stopping entirely so she may regain what energy she could.

A surge of anger propelled her arm against the plastic sheet dividing her and Clara. Her hand slid down the thick material until it landed in the crevice between the sheet and edge of the bed. Using this newfound leverage, Izzy began pulling her weight with her right arm, while pushing against the mattress with her left. The juicy idea of giving up had crossed her mind, just as it had when her former severely fit self, besieged by physical and psychological cramps, had desired to slow her run to a crawl at the three-thousand-metre mark. Her conditioned lungs had burned then. Now they were volcanic.

But the agony and certain death would be worth it. Not only for herself, but Clara, who had never felt a pang in her endless life.

Izzy now found herself at a ninety-degree angle: the top half of her body sprawled laterally across the bed; the bottom half remained affixed to where it had been since she embarked upon this suicide mission of sorts. After a quick mental team huddle with her barely-working parts, she used her right hand to push against the plastic sheet. The damn thing was like a

wall of concrete. Her reluctant body threatened to pull the plug on the whole operation, but a little bit of that wholesome anger, and a lot of thinking about what would happen to Clara if she failed, helped free the bottom of the plastic sheet from between the mattresses. Izzy exhaled so deeply, the fog outside of her only window found its way to her eyes.

One breath.

Her vision slowly...

Two breaths.

...slowly...

Three breaths.

...returned.

She felt her old nemesis oxygen assisting her rushing blood to restore her vision. But she knew better; death had brushed past her.

*Move it*, she urged herself.

Izzy hadn't intended to escape by falling on her head, but as she shimmied herself closer... closer... closer, then over... over... over the edge of the bed, it seemed the only way. Her

head free of the plastic sheet, the faint aroma of cooking bombarded her olfactory. She couldn't help but sacrifice a valuable breath to take in the recipe she had shared with her daughter long ago. *You're using too much garlic powder*, she thought, the seasoning burning her sinuses. But that was Isabelle: too much or too little of everything.

Her shoulders hanging over the edge of the bed, thinned blood rushing to her head, Izzy wondered—not for the first time—what Isabelle would think when the time came to trudge upstairs, check on her dying mother, and find her however she ended up. *Hopefully, with Clara in my arms*, she thought.

She wondered if her daughter would even care.

The pair of Izzy's had lived a life of few kisses and plenty of bites. Izzy had made the cliché attempts to live via her namesake (Isabelle's ankles were still intact, after all). Her daughter had indeed run; not on the track, but away from home, turning the typical one-off act of rebellion into a quarterly sport. When she was home, Isabelle would blame Izzy for all of her life's unwanted biographic details: the casting out of her father, the selfish act of naming her after herself (never mind the tradition), the reason for her isolating unattractiveness, the

asthma and other varieties of respiratory ailments courtesy of her chain-smoking. That her only child had decided to punish her by never marrying, never having children, was not lost on Izzy. Still, when Izzy had become too ill to breathe on her own, it was Isabelle who rushed her to the hospital; and it was Isabelle who brought her home, tucked her into bed, and made sure the oxygen tent kept her alive.

But after seven days of intolerable confinement, seven days of embarrassing baths and changes, seven days of no words exchanged save for begrudged greetings and farewells, Izzy had decided that this foggy afternoon was the right time to free herself. And, if she could manage, Clara.

Beloved Clara.

She could no longer see her only friend, but knew she was right where she had left her. *I'm coming*, she thought, hoping the suffocating air out here wouldn't render her a liar.

Like in the old days, when slower competitors somehow cruised past her, good old-fashioned anger fuelled her cause, and she writhed her dangling body further over the edge of the bed like a fish out of water. *A fish that wants out of her damn*

*boowl!* she goaded herself, and grew angrier at her handicap. The fingertips on her right hand touched something cold, hard. It took her a moment to realize she had touched the floor. Her left hand, still pushing against the bunched-up comforter, worked alone to send her over the rest of the way.

In the space of seconds, Izzy saw the ceiling, then her abdomen, then her legs, the latter two crashing down on her. Within the same seconds, she had felt emptiness beneath her, then the same cold, hard floor forcing itself into her neck and spine. Precious breaths were knocked out of her, and the fog returned, this time most certainly accompanied by death.

It took her a few moments to realize that death smelled an awful lot like garlic. A few more moments, and Izzy understood she hadn't died... and that her daughter wouldn't have heard a thing if she had. She remained alone. On the floor. Alive. For now.

Alive enough to save Clara.

Slowly, surely, Izzy wriggled away from the bed until her dumb legs hit the floor. Still, her daughter remained downstairs, oblivious, or willfully so. But in case obliviousness

turned to awareness, Izzy needed to move as quickly as her lame body would allow at this late stage in the race. *Last one-hundred metres*, she implored.

Since sitting herself up was impossible, she needed to figure out how to get Clara to come down to her level. *Could've just grabbed her, and brought her into the tent*, she scolded herself, *save yourself this stupidity*. But she knew it wouldn't have been fair to Clara, to have her lifelong companion go from breathing one brand of plastic air to another. No. She wanted Clara's first breath to be one-hundred-percent, certifiable oxygen... even if it was tinged with garlic.

Izzy flexed the fingers on her left hand, expecting to feel a break, akin to that long-ago ankle, that would prevent her from crossing *this* finish line. Everything felt in working order. Hand shaped like a spider, the fingers crawled along the floor until they found the nightstand's feet. They climbed past the bottom drawer, then the middle, then-

She stopped, having reached as high as she could go. She looked at the progress her hand had made, and was angered and disappointed to see the tips of her fingers so close to the top. So close to Clara.

No longer able to uphold itself, her arm fell to the floor for her daughter not to hear. Her shallow, disparate breathing became shallower, more disparate. The retinal fog grew thicker. And she was certain the last time she would see Clara was in the memories she had very limited time to relive:

Sneaking into her late mother's bedroom—this very same bedroom—to sneak a peek at Clara, high on her shelf.

Receiving Clara on the eve of her mother's passing—in this very same bedroom—on the condition that she pass Clara on to *her* daughter, should she have one, when her own end was near.

Asking Isabelle to take Clara off the shelf, and sit her on the nightstand; the plan to release Clara had been confirmed, all the more so by her daughter's routine sneer and remark: “Ugly thing.” Even had Isabelle loved Clara as much as she had, Izzy felt it *her* duty to finally free her.

*Come on, you useless cigarette-holder. Last fifty metres.*

Her nicotine-stained spider-hand rediscovered the nightstand's feet, and, once more, began its ascent.

Past the bottom drawer.

*Forty metres.*

Past the middle drawer.

*Thirty metres.*

Past the bottom of the top drawer.

*Twenty metres.*

Finding the top drawer's knob...

*Ten metres.*

...where it hung...

*Come on.*

...unwilling to move.

**COME ON!**

Her hand sprang back, the drawer with it.

Sliding.

Sliding.

Sliding.

Until the heavy piece abruptly stopped, having reached its limit. The nightstand leaned slightly forward, and Izzy



glimpsed her legacy as the dead meat filling of a floor-and-nightstand sandwich. But the nightstand had other plans; before it settled back into place, it made sure to shake free the tall, glossy box.

The impact was painful, a sharp corner hitting her perfectly in the eye, but nothing compared to the torture her lungs were putting her through. Instead of fog, there was rain. Izzy blinked the burning tears away, bringing not the nightstand into focus, but a face.

And what a beautiful face it was. Skin made of meringue. A faint smile on pink lips barely formed. Rosy cheeks forever pinched into dimples. Black eyebrows arching over a pair of unblinking bejewelled eyes. Had they seen Izzy? *All* the Izzy's? From Grandma Izzy to this sorry-excuse-for-an-Izzy?

They stared at each other for some time, Izzy refusing to blink, like her little friend, lest she slip into death during one of those slivers of blackness. The smell of garlic was fading. She couldn't tell if her daughter was altering the recipe in some way, or if her senses were gradually shutting down.

*Last ten metres*, she thought. Perhaps her final thought.

Izzy used the left hand that made this final reunion possible to locate the pristine cardboard flap above Clara's head. Not with anger, but love, Izzy tore open the lid that had sealed the doll in her prison for three generations, and watched as Clara took in her first-ever breath of fresh air.





## On the Edge of the Room

He has opened the door. She has seen that the door is open. He sees her. She sees him. And she's standing in front of him. She tells him to get back into the room. He doesn't want to get it back into the room. He asks her perhaps politely if you can leave the room. She tells him he cannot leave the room. This is because he cannot leave the room. So it's a bit of silence between them. As they're both looking to exert their opposite wills. He just wants to go. She just wants him to stay.

They are strangers. Probably never saw each other before this moment. It is her job to make sure that he doesn't leave the room. In fact, it is her job to make sure that no one leaves the room. She's very good at her job. However, she has never really had any kind of a confrontation on it. And so she might feel a little level of anxiety at having to confront him about it. Particularly as he is more or less a stranger. And he might feel more than a little apprehension as well. After all, he's being told that he can't have the one thing that he wants right now.

And right now he's trying to figure out whether or not she's actually any kind of authentic authority. She's just standing there. It's not like she looks like she's in any kind of a uniform or anything like that. What's the worst that could happen if he just pushed her aside and started making a break for it down the room? It wouldn't be that difficult. She doesn't seem like a very imposing person. So there wouldn't really be any difficulty and actually doing what he wants to do. But they would be afraid of the consequences. He would be afraid of there being consequences.

Honestly he doesn't know why she wants him to stay in the room. And she doesn't know why they want him to stay in the room either. But it is her job. It's her job to make sure that everyone remains in the room. And again: it's a job that she's been very good at to this point. But to this point she has never actually been challenged on it in anyway. So she doesn't know exactly how to approach this particular situation. It's possible that she's going to break down and simply allow him to leave. But that would be breaking the one rule she's got. And it is the only job that she's got right now. Just making sure that no one

leaves the room. She doesn't want to mess it up. She doesn't want to have problems with it.

He's almost certain that he can leave the room. But there's really nothing stopping him from doing so. But even more so than not wanting to have consequences for leaving the room he doesn't really want to upset her. She is, after all, a stranger. And who knows who she might now? There might be people that she knows that are people who mean a lot to him. Or a lot to his employment or whatever. And he doesn't wanna have to mess with the idea of her being somehow important in someway to some other aspect of his life. Particularly if he's going to run the risk of causing her bodily harm by simply leaving the room. When he doesn't even really know why he wants to leave the room.

It is entirely possible that he wants to leave the room because he's been there for long enough. It has, after all, been quite a long time. But said she doesn't have a watch for a phone and there's no clock in the room, he really has no idea how long he's been there. There's no window in the room or anything like that. And no one else seems to be talking to anyone else. There are probably people inside the room who have full knowledge of how

long they've been there. They might narrow down to the last fraction of a second what time of day it is. This is entirely possible.

In any case, he feels as though he doesn't know enough to be able to develop the right kind of strategy for getting out. Which is interesting because she's half inclined to feel a sense of regret or resentment at the people who have given her this job in the first place. After all, they haven't exactly educated her as to why it is that she needs to make sure that everyone remains in the room.

And that's kind of important for her to be able to effectively do her job given the fact that this man could, at any point, ask her why he can't leave the room. And she won't have an answer for him. And so there would be a bit of a backpedaling just in general. And that might lead to a physical backpedaling which might give him the space he needs to leave the room. She's just about to let him leave. And maybe tell him not to go far out of some concerned for his safety in her employment or something like that. And he is just about ready to close the door. Go back inside. And maybe wait.

Dan and there's a Santa footsteps down the hallway. There's



been another force entirely. People look a little bit more official than her. People who look like they have other problems to deal with her much more serious than him. Whatever it was that might have been between them in whatever decision it was it might have been made is now completely preempted. It's out of their hands now. And someone else is involved. The higher authority of some sort. Exactly what it is that they're going to decide exactly why it is that they're going to decide what it is that they're going to decide is all a matter of speculation at this point. But it's probably not important. Because it's not in their hands anymore anyway.



## **Samantha Slaven**

is a legal assistant by day, writer of most formats by night. She lives with her emotional support human, Shawn, and barking cat, Vader, in the wilds of Suburban Philadelphia. Samantha loves horror movies, spicy food, and dancing in public.

# The Newlywed Contemplates Motherhood

As I sit

Questions

About the honeymoon

About the wedding

About babies

Thoughts of moving forward

From trauma

From pain

From being treated

Like a child

Like an infant

Taking steps to be better

Doctors appointment

Blood draw

Gynecologist

Drink water

Lose weight

Enter stress

More stress  
Still self harm  
Self doubt  
Thoughts of jumping  
Running  
Leaving love behind

You step  
In the spotlight  
Center stage  
Command an audience  
With a buzz tipped microphone

Again I sit  
In the audience  
Practicing my line

“Can I teach my own child how to swim?”



**Ed Brickell**

lives in Dallas, Texas with two cats, Harper and Maya. He reads and writes, hikes and watches birds, and posts his published poetry at [shortsurpriselife.com](http://shortsurpriselife.com).

He has recently been published or will be published soon in Hiram Poetry Review, Modern Haiku, Last Leaves Magazine, Loch Raven Review, Backchannels, and other publications, and is currently compiling his first chapbook manuscript.

## My Pretty Roosevelt

Be my Roosevelt,  
My four-term President  
With a new deal underneath  
Your bright skirt,  
Legs shining like US steel,

Someone whom “dapper” still fits,  
Your cigarette perched in  
Its mother-of-pearl holder,  
Clamped tight  
In your glittering teeth,

And it's okay  
If your other lover  
Sleeps with another lover  
In your fine white house,

And it's okay  
If while kissing babies for cameras  
Atom bombs fall through your head,

And if we sit knee to knee  
With drunken ministers  
And mustachioed murderers,  
Plot to make Evil  
Blow his foolish brains out,

The bits falling like ticker tape  
On the cheering crowds  
As the sailor bends the woman back  
And drinks deep  
And I turn to you,

Will you be waiting  
With that campaign smile,  
My pretty Roosevelt?



## All I Can Hear Tonight

All I can seem to hear tonight  
Are Dylan's fingers squeaking on the strings,  
The quartet's grunts and sniffs  
As they wrestle with Beethoven,  
Alfred Brendel humming along  
With a Schubert sonata,

And all I can seem to hear tonight  
Is the train rumble under the cellist's feet,  
Pigeons making noisy love in the rafters  
While a choir begins below,  
Miles Davis telling Teo to play that back Teo,  
Teo, play that back,

And Teo plays it back,  
The fumbled chords,  
The false starts,  
The traffic noises,  
And a laughing Robert Plant tells Jimmy Page no  
Leave it, yeah and they left it and  
I'm hearing it all tonight,  
It's all I can seem to hear.

## I Like to Read About the Ancients

I like to read about the ancients,  
Sitting in their little stone houses,  
Figuring it all out:

The sun? A chariot pulled by horses.  
Disease? Demons pricking you  
With tiny pitchforks.  
This planet? A bright coin  
In the begging palm of a giant,  
His long hair streaming constellations.

Much research remains to be done.  
How do the sun's horses live in the sky?  
What are the tiny pitchforks made of?  
What will happen if the giant drops the earth?

The horses falter in the flames.  
The tips of the tines sink deeper.  
The ocean coves tremble like jelly  
In the giant's tiring hand.



**Nathan Whiting**

has performed Contemporary dance in New York  
and Bhutto in Japan, run races longer than 100 miles  
and meditates on the universal beatitude. His new  
Polytopic poetry is just beginning to be noticed  
internationally.

## BRANCH ◀UNITY▶ SPREADS

(rain.                      Snow joins)

The river has      ↘                      ↙                      the ice.

flows on → imagination, ↓                      ↑

↓                      ↓                      how drifts move

yes,                      as energy comes from out-

side the current,

fish in a moldy river,

↓

perhaps want the other oxygen.-

however

↓                      ↙

we

a *mood* [here] on this page      as

gills      perceive

*ten* moods ↗

life along the water.

↓

Dusk,                      our names.

we {dimly} remember ⇅

gone love →

often touched by steam.-

Devastation—————drowne  
d————→ by ice

a sidewalk broken under a plow!  
power;

↓,

cities empty → *skeletally* → our  
computers

↘ look busy with-  
out us,

attitudes : objects ↗                      ↑

ideals : objects → property con-  
stantly insistent.

NIGHT ↘

: no election confirms IT but  
IT

drifts between galaxies for  
eons.

## MIDDAY PERHAPS FOREVER

High June sun  
still                      G                      'n  
R                      barely motion  
sail  
The E harbor  
a *slow* boat  
A  
oil  
T                      rock-still  
barge barge  
still  
↙                      scrap metal  
one  
**dark** spidery tug on a breezeless web  
blue—blue—blue  
blue                      for a few mo-  
ments *a gust*,  
the distant piledriver  
*pound*                      *pound*                      *pound*                      *pound*  
*pound*                      *pound*                      *pound*

cosmic  
from everywhere  
geese heads tall on long  
↑  
necks,

## T O W E R S

*swirl* act as if empty  
↑↑ stiff,  
The few clouds ∖ a tanker's  
timeless wait without history.  
↓ point to NWK.

unhurried, delicate — *swirls*.  
Time crawls around

but not through me

an urge from ↗↓

descends  
around a *wish*  
to rise ↓  
as a sparrow glides, arrives on a water  
edge rock, *a cinder*.





## **CLS Sandoval**

, PhD (she/her) is a pushcart nominated writer and communication professor with accolades in film, academia, and creative writing who speaks, signs, acts, publishes, sings, performs, writes, paints, teaches and rarely relaxes. She has presented over 50 times at communication conferences, published 15 academic articles, two academic books, three full-length literary collections: *God Bless Paul*, *Soup Stories: A Reconstructed Memoir*, and *Writing Our Love Story*, and three chapbooks: *The Way We Were*, *Tumbleweed: Against All Odds*, and *The Villain Wore a Hero's Face*. She is raising her daughter and dog with her husband in Alhambra, CA.

## Needing to Let Go

You'll never know  
what I had let go of  
to hold on to you

Even with evidence to the contrary  
I continued to love you  
like you only loved me  
until I just could not

We personify objects  
to take the place of people  
we have objectified

I am slowly letting go  
of the promise of knowing the future  
before it comes true.

## Snowing

He says he's just not sure. He wants to for me, but he is afraid that he will be no good at it--he's afraid he will become his own father. And yet I stay. He says I can, he knows I can, I'm perfect just the way I am, and I will never have the same problems as my mother. And yet he leaves. Snow looks so much like soft, inviting down. The haze around everyone makes me feel that we are all just in our own romance movie. but it always ends. For me, it was singing my funny Valentine in Flagstaff in November. Andrew never gave me that kiss his eyes promised. I should never have given up the trombone. My sister should have stuck with violin. And somewhere, it's still snowing.

## **Your Growth by Monkey Bars**

When you were two  
The playground looked so dangerous  
So many places to fall from  
So many big kids to push you  
You reached for those monkey bars  
They were so far from your little chubby arms  
I lifted you  
You put your arms up and giggled  
I carried you under the parallel bars  
No way that your arms could support your weight  
Your little hands couldn't even grip around them

When you were three  
The playground still looked dangerous  
But I was equally fearful that you would push  
As be pushed  
You requested the lift toward those bars  
Your hands could grip  
Hold your weight for a second  
And I still carried you across

When you were four  
We were in lockdown from COVID  
Rarely went outside to a park  
When we did  
The playground was roped off  
For the dangers I hadn't considered before  
You didn't get to practice much on the Monkey Bars

When you were five  
You went to Kindergarten  
Schools were re-opened  
And the playground was available at recess and lunch

You and your friends caught each other up  
On techniques for swinging  
And getting across those bars

Now, at six  
The playground isn't a scary place  
It's all fun  
You can't get enough  
You can jump from the ground  
To a grip on the Monkey Bars  
A breath or two gets you all the way across  
And back  
I have to consciously keep myself on the bench  
My whole body longs to stand near  
    Ready to hold you  
        Support you  
            Not let you  
fall  
But I know you can get up on your own now

## The Old Church Campus

Roosevelt Drive Baptist Church later renamed itself as The Church of Opportunity. I always thought the name was a little cult-y, but the church itself was more than just a building I went to every Sunday morning and Wednesday evening. It was home, in many ways more home than my house. The front lawn was where I played tackle football in my ruffle dresses and learned what it meant to be clothes lined. The two-story classroom building was where I attended Sunday school and first learned about Heaven and Hell, fueling my lifelong quest for meaning in this life. The fireside room was where we learned to make candles out of crayons and inspired my disastrous attempt at a re-do of that craft at home. The old sanctuary with the avocado carpet became the youth room and then the site of the Spanish language service as our funds depleted after the Great Divorce of the Church of Opportunity of the mid 1990s.

First it was Maribel's parents. She and her three brothers and one sister had endured their parents' yelling for years. Everyone was too polite to say a word about it, but all of us kids whispered about it in the hallways. Jack and Denise had been trying to have a baby for years; ever since they got married. They talked about it in prayer circles, and we all wished and prayed for their baby to come soon. Jack did have a baby, but not with Denise. So, their divorce was next. There were a number of other divorces, some between young couples who had just joined and others among the blue hairs who had been hanging on to their marriages out of obligation, or perhaps just because they thought they would have been parted by death sooner.

The new sanctuary was not only where I was baptized, but also where I would sneak into, sit on stage, and talk to God, sometimes aloud. Sometimes I would ask why we were suffering through life, if He had a Paradise waiting above the clouds. Sometimes I would ask why my sister took my things without asking. Sometimes I would ask why I wanted to kiss so many boys if I wasn't supposed to. Sometimes I would just cry. Sometimes, I would sit on the stage, in the dark, singing

worship songs, imagining that the Pastor might one day allow me to do so on a Sunday morning in front of the congregation.

Like my parents' marriage, I never believed it would separate, but it did.





**Samuel Ludke**

is an American Poet from Wisconsin best known  
for his poetry books about love and religion.

## Lovers

Lovers

They make babies and fight

Now one is never happy

You can't be happy unless it is with yourself

So please, don't fight

You must be safe with him

Your own mind

Come on and fight

I see you

Come back and touch her skin

Because you won't ever do it again.

She fought for you yes, but she was evil

I hope you can see the truth

You cannot be happy without your own blood

Sprung from your own loins, the face of the deadly

The evil that you found there

You touch me

You touch my soul

But you are not happy!

## **Life is beautiful**

Life is beautiful

I am the one you need

Pieces of love

I am gone

Let me fight you

I am gone

Come back to me

I see you

Deadly babies

You are mine

Come back by me

Be my girl

I am alone

Come here and touch me

I take you home

I love you now

I want you

Come back and bleed

Come and be here with God!

## **Are you mine?**

Are you mine?

I see you

Come back to me

I am alone

I found you

Come here and see the lovely picture

I see your face now

I'm alive

Come here and be safe

The wind is lonely

The heaven is gone

I see you

Come here

I am here for you!





## **Leslie Dianne**

is a playwright, poet, novelist, screenwriter and performer whose work has been acclaimed internationally at the Harrogate Fringe Festival in Great Britain, The International Arts Festival in Tuscany, Italy, The Teatro Lirico in Milan, Italy and at La Mama, ETC in NYC. Her stage plays have been produced in NYC at The American Theater of Actors, The Raw Space, The Puerto Rican Traveling Theater and The Lamb's Theater, and at Theater Festivals in Texas and Indiana. She holds a BA in French Literature from CUNY and her poetry appears in The Wild Word, Sparks of Calliope, The Elevation Review, Quaranzine, The Dillydoun Review, Line Rider Press, Flashes and elsewhere. Her writing was recently nominated for a Pushcart Prize and Best Of The Net.

## Fossil Time

This is how it was that day:  
the gulls pecking at the sand  
the cranes still,  
feathers rustling in the  
salt breeze  
a single canoe  
floating on the water  
going the way of the tide  
your goodbye love note,  
the meticulous dissection of us  
reduced to a page  
thrown into the sea  
it curls back to the  
shore and lands  
next to a cluster  
of tiny fossils  
I sit next to them  
and I too  
wait for the  
sun and the sand  
to erase time,  
and with it the words  
the memory  
the pain

## L'amour Fou

There was something  
like madness there  
seeing the world  
like it was not  
solid but liquid  
and draining away  
a clockwise vortex  
always moving but  
going nowhere  
the spinning was dangerous  
and delicious, delirious  
there was something  
unbearable and beautiful  
in all of it  
I tried to  
hold on but it was  
impossible, there were  
no edges to the  
spiraling apart  
there was no sense to  
the crazy I felt  
there was no reason in  
this madness called love

## Lean

Lean  
out of life  
so far you fall  
out of today  
into tomorrow and  
spill  
yourself into  
the future  
that way  
you'll know where  
you're going  
and when you  
get lost  
the stars will  
tell you that  
they wished  
for you to be right  
where you are



## Gerard Sarnat

has been nominated for the pending Science Fiction Poetry Association Dwarf Star Award, won San Francisco Poetry's 2020 Contest, the Poetry in the Arts First Place Award plus the Dorfman Prize, and has been nominated for handfults of Pushcarts plus Best of the Net Awards.

Gerry is widely published including in 2023 San Diego Poetry Annual, 2022 Awakenings Review, 2022 Arts & Cultural Council of Bucks County Celebration, 2022 Rio Grande Valley International Poetry Festival

Anthology, Pocket Samovar, Free State, The Broken City, Sandy River Review, Three Rooms Press/Maintenant, New World Writing, The Font, BigCityLit, HitchLit Review, Lowestoft, Washington Square Review, The

Deronda Review, Jewish Writing Project, Hong Kong Review, Tokyo Poetry Journal, Buddhist Poetry Review, Gargoyles, Main Street Rag, New Delta Review, Arkansas Review, Hamilton-Stone Review, Northampton

Review, New Haven Poetry Institute, Texas Review, Vonnegut Journal, Brooklyn Review, San Francisco Magazine, Monterey Poetry Review, The Los Angeles Review, and The New York Times as well as by NYU,

Slippery Rock, Northwestern, Pomona, Harvard, Stanford, Dartmouth, Penn, Columbia, North Dakota, McMaster, Maine, University of British Columbia and University of Chicago and University of Virginia presses.

He is a Harvard College and Medical School-trained physician who's built and staffed clinics for the disenfranchised as well as a Stanford professor and healthcare CEO. Currently he is devoting energy/ resources to deal with climate justice, and serves on Climate Action Now's board. Gerry's

been married since 1969 with progeny consisting of four collections (Homeless Chronicles: From Abraham To Burning Man, Disputes, 17s, Melting the Ice King) plus three kids/ six grandsons — and is looking forward to potential future granddaughters.

[gerardsarnat.com](http://gerardsarnat.com)

# WANDERING FROM SCHMEER\* TO SADHU TO KEROUACY [III]

## I. Backed Up In (The Bowels Of) A Cold-Water Walk-Up

*Babele* is what my *Bubbe* from the Old Country called me  
as I romped (she sat) on the throw rug of her *heymish* living room  
where Mom, Dad plus I existed.

From the floor she shoveled in all kinds of *geshmak* goodies  
(*maches* herring, *gefilte* fish or chopped liver) both gloomy New Coun-  
try  
parents, away at work, would've been upset about.

When they returned at the end of each day, Mom  
*kvetched* Grandma the gamut of questions about whether his stools  
were balanced, (too loose, too hard)?

When I graduated to babble then toddle,  
the *nachas* term of endearment for this grandchild became *boychick*  
(and it stuck the rest of *Bubbe's* life).

Before the *mensh* passed (coronaries coated with *schmaltz*, *kreplach*,  
*kugel*),

Dad who was an MD like me and thusly a *mamish* catch for her *davka*

only child, asked that same GI litany about her.

Now having already survived ten years more than *Bubbe*,  
stricken bodily functions (which seemed to take care of themselves  
like *bubkes*  
when I was younger) *bashtimt* no longer do.

*\* In Yiddish, thick spread like cream cheese*

## II. 3X3

### 1. ARCHAIC TO NEW TESTAMENTS [iii]

#### i. Churchagogue Doodling During Skyler's Bar Mitzvah

Ehad eloheynu -- Deuteronomy watchman blessing plus curse,  
wondrous One whose celestial womb covers meteoric Earth,  
fashioner of moonlit gateways to heaven's steeped dome,  
kadosh kadosh through homeless brains and genitals;  
on occasion of forty eclectic desert years' tears,  
our broken barn's on a smoggy chartreuse hill  
above this burning world's dumpster-diving  
dessert trash below a figure 8 overpass's  
crucifix rivulet of electric cars baruch  
she'ma urban sparrow-chirping  
among rooster birds of dawn  
or Big Ben's mother hens.

#### ii. תיבת נח

Noah's Ark, Noah's Bagels

Houston Astros play baseball



at sweltering Minute Maid Park  
where after an unprecedented start  
with juiced pitchers throwing  
lots of shutouts they sit atop  
the whole American League  
except when slipsliding into  
fifty inches of liquid the size  
of Lake Michigan courtesy  
of Noah's youngest brother  
Harvey whom their gods above  
sent to liquidate Texas humanity  
which did not heed warnings  
to reduce gas guzzling/ smog  
or maybe to get the attention  
of our globe's most powerful  
nation and its new President  
or perhaps just a peak at coming  
attractions to reduce Bangladesh  
over-population or simply climate  
change caprice -- bottomline almost  
everybody eventually will reside in  
the same overheated homeless boat.

### iii. Trevor Noah's Ark

Aardvark or  
snakeskin stilettos  
are inappropriate for  
the First Lady to wear  
visiting Hurricane Harvey,  
but given that she lives with-  
in  
a permanent disaster zone, let  
us  
perhaps just try to cut her  
some slacks.

I've always wanted to get in-  
side Melania's

silence to find out what  
maybe really goes on.



## 2. ISLE OF MAN [iii]

### i. Cognitively Reframing Our Homecoming

"The only thing that makes life possible  
is permanent, intolerable uncertainty:  
not knowing what comes next."

*The Left Hand of Darkness.*

Ursula K. Le Guin

Three-month silent retreat,  
spaceship alone no map,  
I spend two-thirds of  
my time with eyes  
closed on purpose.

Zazendo primal scream,  
closet Vipassana let's  
the love in non-self  
-- other eight hours  
we pretend sleep.

## ii. Defecation Meditation

Robotic mantra each day of week  
since hip replacement surgery --  
on constipating narcotics for pain:

*May I be happy. May I be healthy.*

*May I be safe. May I have a BM.*

## iii. Cerebral Cotton Ball Brothers

I belong to Stanford groups:  
the first almost 22 years,  
the second now nearly 10.

One I'm among the oldest  
men,  
the other I am the youngest.

Each enlightens me a lot.

Nobody's druthers -- the way  
-- a few having reached it --  
to dementia -- teaches tons.

Those of us who forget easily

tend to arrive at once-a-month

lunch during awfully odd times.

3. SADHU SEQUENCE [iii]

i. Palo Alto Renunciant

Sadhu of Stanford  
via Silicon Valley,  
I wander in white  
loincloth. Biksa  
bowl for daily

food offerings  
is now my only  
possession with  
one exception --  
a new iPhone X.

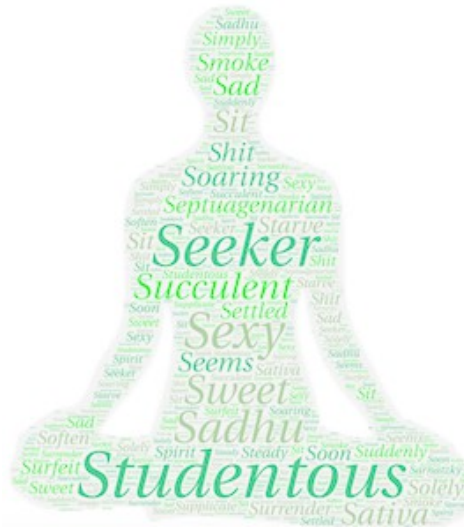


ii. Studentous Seeker

Septuagenarian sadhu  
-- sweet succulent sexy  
soaring sativa smoke

suddenly seems solely  
simply surfeit sad shit.  
Surrender, soften, starve.  
Settled steady spirit soon?

Sit, supplicate, Sarnatzky.



### iii. Geriatric Parlor Game Hot Seat haiku

Fourth joint replacement  
in last year, my wife and I  
play musical chairs.





## **This Planet is Not Safe**

Tonight. Tonight it is friendly night. They will not make me cry tonight.

They are excited. Everyone is so excited. I want to disappear. I want to hide. There are so many people. Bad things will happen. Bad things always happen. They touch my privates. They touch me and touch me and they laugh and smile and they tell me I am bad, such a bad boy for what happens to my pee pee when they touch me, but they are the ones who touch it and I am never ever supposed to touch it (except for peeing).

This is before my dad came back.

This is before so much.

But this night, this is the night when they will not touch me. Maybe. There are strangers over because we have a T.V. set and it is night time and they are all excited about the moon. The moon the moon the moon the moon and I walk out to see if I can see the ship landing on the moon. I can't. But I can see the moon. And the people are talking. And I am quiet so I don't get back-handed or the coat hanger. The picture on the TV is grainy and



the newsman is serious. And then there are the radio sounds and the men and they are serious. And I want to hide. I'm so tired of being touched. And sad. Sad. Edmund, you have to smile more. Edmund come here. Edmund you have to clean this up. You spilled it. I will get the coat hanger for sure now. But not now. Now is still the friendly night and my mom is smiling. But really she is the devil.

She is such a liar. She touches my thing. She pushes my face into the worst place. They all do. And then they tell me how wrong I am and what a bad little boy, and they make me sleep in a crib. I sleep in a crib. I am four-years-old.

SCREAMS: They will not give me a bed.

And everyone is worried about the invisible men on the moon and I want to be invisible and I want to be invisible and I want to be on the moon and I am tired of the backs of the hands and the way they hate me.

I have tried to run away but I always get hungry.

They do not even notice. It is a small town and they say 'what an adventuresome little boy' I am and then they beat me.

People see me all over town. They do not know that I spend my days all over town because they touch me and they beat me and they do the wrongest sad-making everything to me in the bathtub. I don't like it. I don't like it.

SCREAMS: I don't like it!

One day I will grow up and kill you.

One day I will grow up and I will kill everyone. One day one day one day everyone will know what you do to me in the bathtub and in the kitchen and in the stairwell with the coat hanger. Everyone will know.

But tonight it is the friendly friendly night and the people are over and we are all worried and excited about the astronauts and I keep looking outside at the moon and everyone is looking at the TV and my mom comes over to me and I want to disappear but it is friendly night and I cannot stop the coat hanger

BREATHLESSLY: from coming from coming from coming.

It will come for me she makes me sleep in a crib I want to scream and like I am an idiot she says, "The astronauts are on the

moon.” And she points into the sky like I do not know where the moon is.

And I look where she wants me to look and I say what she wants me to say and no I haven’t told anyone I swear I swear I swear and she smiles and anything could happen in any moment and all the plates in the kitchen could fly could fly and shatter on walls on walls on walls but tonight is nicey-nice-nice-night and there is ice cream for the kids and there are Mr. Axelson’s boys that call us trash because everyone knows my mom is a drunk but they do not know what she does to me and

this is one small step for man and one giant leap for mankind.

this night this night this night this is supposed to be the happy night where we are all celebrating.

And all I want to do is hide. My crib is so small. I am four and I can’t stretch my legs out and I don’t even really know how to say that. Stretch my legs out. It’s just a feeling. It’s just a feeling that sprouted in me. A sadness. A sadness that would never go away. Truth. Tell the truth. Did you break it. Yes, he did. He’s lying. He’s crying so he don’t get a beating. He’s a dirty lit-

tle liar. He's a dirty little boy. A dirty little boy. A dirty little boy.

These sneering faces and their smells. Their smells. All their different horrible smells when they touch me. But tonight the Axelsons are over because they ain't got no TV and we might be the trash but my mom did not drink today so she could carry trays of lemonade and maybe the Axelsons would think we are people but we ain't and everybody knows it because I don't even have a dad.

Yes, I do. No you don't. Yes I do.

They hit me in the face for lying.

MOM: "Put up your dukes, Lucy."

This is when she gave me a bloody nose after I called her a liar.

"Put up your dukes, Lucy." And she hits me. I know better than to hit back. She hits my fists with her fists and her fists feel like rocks. And I thought: she is hitting me with her skeleton.

I know she isn't that hard everywhere. She pushes my face down there and says, "See, soft."

And then she calls me a dirty little boy. "Put up your dukes, Lucy." Put up your dukes. And her skeleton hurts my fists and I cry and then I get beat. Don't tell. Don't ever tell. You ain't even allowed to talk. Children are to be seen and not heard.

But tonight they were on the moon and there was lemonade.

"I know what you did." I want to hide. I know the night will be over. There will be a beating one day. One day. Every day.

I was four. They made me sleep in a crib.

In the morning there is just quiet.

I can easily climb out of my crib and sneak out of the bedroom without my mom even knowing I woke up. I climb good. And I climb up on the counter in the kitchen and get a bowl. Cereal. Climb down. Milk. Use the chair to pour the milk. Don't spill. Don't you spill don't you spill don't you spill goddamn it if I have to clean up after you little devils one more time

I swear to god I will kill you. I will kill you. Do not spill do not spill do not spill.

My hand shakes as I pull out the milk. It is so heavy. It is a glass bottle and my fingers can almost fit almost fit.

“Remember.”

This is the good voice inside my head. The one that does not kill turtles. It says, “Remember to use two hands. Remember not to reach too far.” Sometimes I get all those steps right and I can pour the cereal and the milk and add not too much sugar and sometimes I can do all that but when I can’t she will make me scream and my sisters will laugh and hate me. I do not remember a time when I am not hated. They don’t even know that I killed the turtle but I did.

I’m white. The others live on the other side of the railroad tracks where I must never go cause the others just waiting to kill a little boy like me. That’s what they say. They say if I ever walk that way I’m dead.

Old Joe, he’s the real town drunk. He lost his arm in a car wreck one night. Driving around sticking his arm out the window of the car screaming at his wife and a car coming on got

him. Just like that. Just like that. That's what they say. Just like that. You keep your goddamned arms inside this car. You keep your arms inside this car or you will lose it like Old Joe did and then you will be a one armed man like Old Joe and that's pathetic.

Why are you smelling your finger? Where did you put that finger?

GET OUT!

I just walk around town. I walk all the way up to the railroad tracks but I never cross them.

You'll get killed if you go down by them shacks they got down there.

So I don't cross them. And I don't play on them.

Goddamn you stay off them tracks and don't play on them or throw rocks or make a goddamn nuisance of yourself the way you do.

I try to stay good and hid. There's a park with a cabin. It's got a loft. Ain't no glass in it. It's a prairie cabin. No door. No glass in the window in the loft. It's the playground equipment.

And there is a second doorway with no door, way up there, in that loft and it feels so high and every time I am up in there I wonder what it would be like to be dead. I wonder what it would be like to jump and break my neck.

*You'll break your neck climbing up there like that. You'll break your neck.*

So I always wonder what it will be like to break my neck and die. I always wonder what dead is. I always wonder what dead is. Dead is this thing that comes for you and is you and you are no more.

They try to tell me. They try to tell me that they will kill me. They tell me they will kill me with suffocating me with pillows in my sleep if I don't stay in the goddamned crib but I can't I can't.

I'll tell. I'll tell you keep me in that crib I'll tell about you pushing my face in the soft place I'll tell. I'll tell.

“And I'll put a pillow over your face while you are sleeping and that will be so sad. My baby boy died like that, so sad. But you won't feel sad. You'll be dead. That's all.”



Then there is the drinking and soon she is beating me with the coat hanger. She aims for the backs of my knees so that the welts are harder to see. She hits my ears, shoulders, everywhere.

You dirty little boy. You dirty little boy. Wham wham whamming with rhythm and the two other devil tormentors are in hiding. In terror. This is not all girls against boys. This is them against me because I'm the littlest. The easiest to beat. The dirty little boy. Whack.

Dirty whack little whack boy whack.

She will beat me until she is too exhausted to beat me and she will pass out.

My sisters will not come to comfort me.

When they are beaten I will not go to comfort them. We were all just born into this.

You don't have a daddy – this is sung...this is sung by the little brats up and down the block. Tony Axelson. Jack Eugene, Celia...Patty...Eric. All them kids singing: you don't have a daddy.

They don't know what I have.

I have the cabin in the park where I'm alone and thinking of jumping. I know it is not high enough. We will move from here one day to Santa Monica and I will think the same thoughts on the balcony there in the sun.

But I don't know that.

I do not know that time will collapse the older I get, and I will be unable to live in my present moment without always also living in the past.

I do not know that I will only ever be able to pretend that I am having a meaningful experience because whatever it is that allows a person to have meaningful experiences will be burned out of me. I will always be in that cabin crying about the coat hanger beatings and the abuse and I will always be at the bottom of the stairs getting beaten with coat hangers.

I will always be screaming.

I will always be killing a tortoise.

It was a tortoise. I was so young when it happened. I did not know the difference between turtle and tortoise.

“You didn’t kill a tortoise.”

It’s true. I may not have killed the tortoise but I did bring a brick down upon it and I ran crying.

It was gone when I went back the next day.

“You didn’t kill a tortoise.”

This is the voice again that helps sometimes.

I have all these voices.

I live in all these moments and I have all these voices.

SHOUTING: “YOU GODDAMN DIRTY LITTLE  
ROTTEN SON OF A BITCH YOU COULD NOT POUR PISS  
OUT OF A BOOT WITH THE INSTRUCTIONS ON THE  
HEEL.”

That’s my dad.

If I’m in that cabin, I haven’t met him yet. You can well imagine that he turns out to be just as charming as my mother and sisters.

I do not know the exact age I was when he unleashed upon me the sentence that would become the soundtrack of my

life: You goddamn dirty little rotten son of a bitch you couldn't pour piss out of a boot with the instructions on the heel.

I live in all the moments at the same time.

Cathy Valois has just learned that my braces have come off and she is running her tongue all over the smooth teeth for the first time.

My god that is good.

I am 14.

But no! Remember: I am three now and I think I killed a turtle.

This is a big deal for me. I did not feel badly about the tortoise at the time.

I saw the brick bounce off of it. How big a stone might a four-year-old pick up anyway? Not huge.

It was in fact much smaller than the tortoise that I dropped it on, but the tortoise represented for me a moment—the first moment—where I did something bad. I had done plenty of things that had gotten me terrible beatings. I had spilled milk. Left messes. Touched myself. Complained. Nothing that I ever

had done made me feel like a dirty little boy until I dropped the brick on the tortoise. I guess I just leaned into it. After that.

“How are they gonna get back?” I ask. Children are to be seen and not heard.

“How are they gonna?” My voice rises. “In the capsule. In the capsule. How are they gonna?”

We are back at the moon landing and I keep interrupting.

They are taking their first steps and I am suddenly worried they will not get back.

In front of the Axelsons my mom says, “Go to bed.”

And I yell, “I ain’t got no bed.”

And she backhands me and rushes me out of the room before I can tell everyone that she puts me in a crib that don’t fit.

I am crying again. She throws me in the crib and says, “If I hear one more word out of you I will kill you.”

“Goodnight.” I say.

**THE END**



**Zach Murphy**

is a Hawaii-born writer with a background in cinema. His stories appear in Reed Magazine, Still Point Arts Quarterly, The Coachella Review, Maudlin House, B O D Y, Litro Magazine, Eastern Iowa Review, and Flash: The International Short-Short Story Magazine. His chapbooks *Tiny Universes* (Selcouth Station Press, 2021) and *If We Keep Moving* (Ghost City Press, 2022) are available in paperback and ebook. He lives with his wonderful wife, Kelly, in St. Paul, Minnesota.



## Lilydale

The waters of the Mississippi River were higher than the high school version of myself on a Saturday night.

I willed my rusted sedan down the winding bends of Lilydale Road, nervously hydroplaning through dirty, cloudy puddles.

Lilydale Road didn't feel the way it used to be, because it simply wasn't the way it used to be. The wildflowers didn't grow there anymore. The squirrels had lost their spunk. The deer that once graced you with their majestic presence had faded away. Even the bald eagles no longer wanted anything to do with this place.

As the water relentlessly overtook the road, I abandoned my little car, waded through the muck, and lunged toward what had remained of the forest. Getting home in time to watch the evening news broadcast with my cat seemed a lot less likely.

The water rushed toward me and I quickly latched onto an elm tree and climbed. My middle school antics had come in handy for once in my life. I reached the top of the tree and sat upon a branch. I looked down below as the flooding waters intensified.

Everything that had managed to stay afloat was already dead—  
plastic trash, hollowed branches, fish with their bellies up.

I gazed out at a city that was never truly home. I had a front  
row view of the factory smoke that always taints the beauty of  
the sky.

I glanced across the tree and noticed that there was a lone wild  
turkey perched on a separate branch. The wild turkey looked at  
me with an uncertainty in its eyes, like it didn't know what  
would happen next.

After a brief moment, the wild turkey fluttered away, and I  
sat on the branch for eternity, waiting for the world to smile  
again.

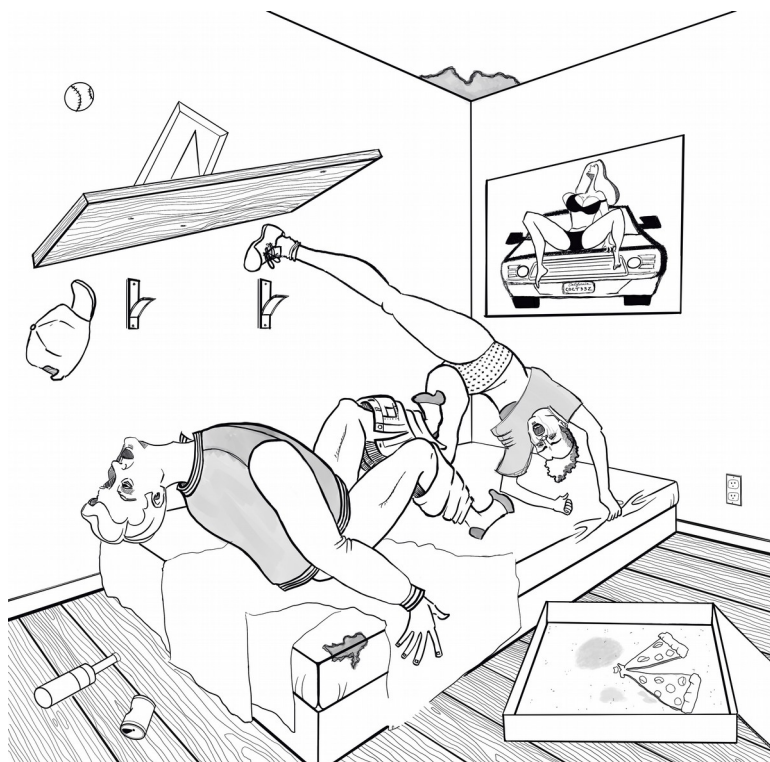


## **Sam Alec**

is a mostly unknown artist currently residing in the San Francisco Bay Area. Some impressive accomplishments include: successfully evading desensitization, a few major demolitions and reconstructions of personal belief systems, a well-cultivated affinity for the ugly and uncomfortable, a handful of lessons learned the hard way, and staying alive this long. Poems from Sam are published or forthcoming in Troublemaker Firestarter, Home Planet News, Big Q, and Hidden Peak Press.



*Tangled*



*Cornered*



*Soulsearch*





**Karen Wolf**

has been published in Smokey Blue Literary and Art Magazine, Oasis Journal, Foliate Oak Literary Magazine, The Drunken Llama, Blynkt, Raw Dog Press, Street Light Press, Lady Blue Literary Arts Journal, Ripcord Magazine, Endlessly Rocking Poems in Honor of Walt Whitman's 200th Birthday, and many others. She is a Pushcart Prize nominee. Her first chapbook, *THAT'S JUST THE WAY IT IS*, was published by Finishing Line Press in 2018, and her second, *TAR SNAKES*, by Plan B Press, arrived in 2022.

She says that poetry soothes the savage beast and opens her eyes to the beauty that abounds within the world.

## While Your Komodo Black

moon eyes behind zoo glass spill  
your grasp of savory water

buffalo take downs, green  
rice fields pulse

coolness across your under  
scales. Under volcano

crater smoke, your tongue  
licks the dead rat lost in a food

maze, waves crashing rocks where  
I buried my sea

captain. A harness  
cinched for a leash

saunter to the  
sandpit, my red

eyes joining your  
scan for a bird

of paradise nest ready to quaff  
eggs. Sharing a lost

dream, we lock eyes.

## Rainwashed

prairie grass surrounds the porch rail—further  
out, compass plants, just  
visible pines edge  
the footpath. A mocking  
bird executes her repertoire—even  
paced to harness daybreak  
whispered into my  
being, to mask a life  
time of swallowing fear, believing the un  
foreseen will clock  
in with or without  
trepidation. I inhale rain

splashed chicory along road  
side fence posts, bull  
frog song wisdom, blue  
heron fishing  
patience, and a certainty  
that confidence will  
buffet the unknown.

## A soul even

a mother can't  
love. *DISCARD*—a throw

away, an anybody-want-this  
unloved-cheap-

disposable-  
hardly-better-than-road

kill  
marked

*MISTAKE?* Told  
to rise above, told

there were reasons: a better  
life, two

parents. Nothing's whole once thrown  
out, not

a life tossed to save dough  
that can't smother

rejection or glue  
back the missing

pieces.



**Kevin Canfield**

is a writer in New York City.

## Mammals

His wolf is greenish-yellow, lurid  
like a never-struck tennis ball,  
and it reeks of wintergreen  
chewing tobacco, and though  
it doesn't always make a sound,  
when it does that sound is the  
third minute of "Band on the Run,"  
the part with the acoustic guitar and  
the line about falling into the sun,  
which issues from his wolf's body  
on a humid May Tuesday in 1974.

## Overpass

Uptown, in a dirt parking lot,  
a pungently peaty Fraser Fir,  
rescued from a sidewalk on  
compost pick-up day, leans  
against one of the mighty  
green I-beams that support  
the six-lane highway, and  
on weekend mornings, when  
there isn't much traffic up above,  
power-napping professional  
drivers roll in and idle by  
the Hudson, their midsize  
sedans facing west.





## **Dominik Slusarczyk**

is an artist who makes everything from music to painting. He was educated at The University of Nottingham where he got a degree in biochemistry. His poetry has been published in various literary magazines including 'Fresh Words', 'Berlin Lit', and 'Home Planet News'.

## **The Main Matter**

Some people cry and  
Some people sigh but  
Those actions are  
Indistinguishable.  
We live lives like  
Lemmings waiting  
For the first  
Drop of rain to  
Strike our  
Outstretched hands.  
We are born the  
Same and we  
Die the same.

## Sword

The man has  
A sweet sword.  
He swings it  
Around in a  
Smooth arc.  
The air screams but  
Nobody can hear it.

## Decent Wages

We were real once;  
Now we are  
Statues standing  
In stony gardens.  
The world  
Rushes past my  
Always open eyes.  
Sometimes people  
Sit beside me  
But they are never  
Truly my friends.  
They flick their  
Fag ends at the  
Ground by my feet -  
They smoulder and  
The smoke makes  
Me choke.  
All I wanted was  
To be beautiful  
For an hour.



## **Jane Hertenstein**

is the author of over 90 published stories both macro and micro: fiction, creative non-fiction, and blurred genre. In addition she has published a YA novel, *Beyond Paradise* and a non-fiction project, *Orphan Girl: The Memoir of a Chicago Bag Lady*, which garnered national reviews. Jane is the recipient of a grant from the Illinois Arts Council. Her writing has been featured in the *New York Times*. She teaches a workshop on Flash Memoir and can be found blogging at <http://memoirouswrite.blogspot.com/>

## The Traveler

Ever notice that the image you hold in your head doesn't always align with reality. This

is especially true when traveling. You can do the research, buy the ticket—and then real life

intervenes to bend the edges of your mental postcard.

In the fall of 2014 I got the opportunity to visit a former college roommate and another acquaintance in Sweden. At this point my daughter was in college and my husband was taking a gap year from his job to pursue an advance degree. It seemed family-wise we were sorting ourselves into our own diverse interests. So I'd be on my own.

Before leaving Chicago I downloaded Top 10 Things to Do in Sweden and one of them was to rent a bike and cycle the Göta Canal, a World Heritage Site. The canal, basically a series of waterways connecting the Baltic Sea to lakes Vänern and Vättern, was situated halfway between my two friends.

I pictured cute little wooden houses, blue checkered skies, and effortless bike paths next to the canal. Then real life intervened to bend the edges of this mental postcard.

Once in Sweden it took a combination of trains and buses to reach the canal trailhead in Sjötorp, and each time I could not say where it was I was trying to go. Either from a lack of sleep (as I was still getting over jetlag) or because the number of con-



sonants outnumbered the vowels, I stumbled when forced to pull the name of the town out of my mouth. I contrived to memorize it—or avoid it, but, afraid of messing up, I thereby fulfilled my self-doubt, bungling it each time.

It was mid-afternoon when I alighted from my last bus onto a puddle-filled street.

I tramped down to the city center: a café, where there was only a barista. I told her I was there in Shn—nops—to hire a bike and ride the famous canal. Her response was that it was past the season.

This second problem was a mere speed bump; I refused to take no for an answer. You see, I had it all planned out in my mind. I'd ride the canal and it would be beautiful and sunny—despite the rain. She said to try the shop down the street and over the bridge.

Gracias. Not really, but I knew they must have a word for thank you. Not one I could pronounce, mind you.

I walked over and indeed saw what looked to be one bike at a little convenience store. The owner told me he could rent me a bike. I informed him I wanted to ride the entire length of the canal and leave the bike at the end. The online tourist bureau had said it was possible to do this. I might have read it at the Göta Canal website. Yes, he answered, but it was past season. That pesky phrase.

Indeed, it was really quiet where I was in the unpronounceable town. Most of the shops were locked and bolted, the shades pulled down. No one was selling ice creams.

I burst into tears.

Suddenly his wife was there beside me telling me to take a deep breath. The man and his wife would rent me a bicycle, but because the sun was setting sooner I would need a room for the night. Fortunately they had a room to rent and quoted me a rate in kroner that sounded like college tuition. I cried harder.

Come to find out it was only \$36 US dollars. Okay. Gulp. Breathe. Drying tears. Yes. YES. Within thirty minutes I was on the bike and pedaling beside the canal. Living the dream.

I watched the long slow Swedish sun dip and hang above the horizon as I rode along the canal, there and back. That evening I slept in a nice soft, clean bed and when I woke up the next day the owner told me which bus to take. I was ashamed to tell him my other problem.

The Euro credit card had a security chip in it while the American ones, the ones always getting hacked, did not. I couldn't use my credit card on the bus to buy my ticket and the driver did not take cash. No problem. And, somehow he fixed it with the driver. I was able to board and go on to the next town, one I couldn't pronounce where I met up with my friend Lotta.

Because of this man and his wife I was able to hold together for a little while longer a picture in my head. Really without a number of people like them my trip to Sweden would have been over before it even began. Everyday there were small miracles that allowed me to travel. Not always did the picture in my head line up with the current situation, but I was getting better at navigating the margin of difference.



**Mark A. Murphy**

is an Irish, LGBTQ+, neurodivergent, working  
class writer, currently surviving marginalisation in the  
UK.

## The Vagaries of Innocence

Remember how the bobcat lied down with the faun,  
before the forest fire ate them both alive.

Call back the last dawn  
when you made love and it wasn't contrived.

O sing for us now, children  
of the future  
as though your very lives depended upon it.

What should we name the Endgame  
which we are choosing

like a jealous heart  
whose love is spent like water?

\*

When the first snowdrop of April yawns.  
When the last written word is stolen.

Remember this morning's conversation  
with the angels,  
before forest and Everglades were done for.

Call back the continually changing apocalypse,  
in whose name, we all walk slip-shod

to our own ends.

## See You Tomorrow

i

I have a tree. I have a pain.

Here, take my tree. Here, take

my pain. Is this tree yours or mine.

Is this pain yours or mine.

Which tree will you entrust

to the *Obersturmbannführer*.

ii

Not all questions have answers.

Not all questions are worth noting.

I can't know you are in pain.

I can only believe you are in pain.

I can't know I'll see you tomorrow.

I can only believe I will see you.



If a tree falls in the forest,  
does anybody hear the forest fall.

## Wheat from Chaff

When we redact the onion's genome  
to prohibit tears

When we silence the apple's DNA  
to suppress bruising

When we activate the tomatoes genes  
to turn it purple

When we manipulate stem cells  
to grow human ears on rats

When we add, remove, or alter  
genetic code, as if to perfect nature

What then for the very ground  
of being?

All our genetic inheritance, 'imperfect'  
like so much of our loose fiscal policy



**Thomas Piekarski**

is a former editor of the California State Poetry Quarterly. His poetry has appeared in such publications as The Journal, Poetry Salzburg, Modern Literature, The Museum of Americana, South African Literary Journal, and Home Planet News. His books of poetry are Ballad of Billy the Kid, Monterey Bay Adventures, Mercurial World, and Aurora California.

poetrypiekarski@yahoo.com

## Big Bang Boogaloo

While ogling at the fuzzy fractured moon  
Sacramento, CA 95818  
I spot a brilliant visitor up high  
And magically slip deep into a swoon,  
Then marshal my composure to commit  
To keenness of a blinded inner eye  
From which all future dreams are to emit.  
Were I a penitent perhaps I'd cry  
Down on bare knees until the end of day,  
Would feast upon the earth and never trust  
Those demons dancing ever in my way.  
My hidden blinded eye will never fail  
To further virgin light along its trail,  
And should my soul amount to only dust  
There'd be no entity I could avail.

## Evolutionary

Evolution needs volition without which there is zero movement, confluence of genes, or random particles vying for supremacy. Electrons collide with quarks, ricochet and swirl in micro worlds we don't see. And yet silly odes shall be written in languages of the smitten by weebegone poets with static ideologies. Many critics also espouse the safe path, reject new cadence, new imagery, touting status quo, which fosters artistic inertia.

The melting face, ice turned vapor, gigantic sun, edict, word written, testimonial, newborn infant, these spark volition, evolution in various forms.

## Emperor of Creation

I am the emperor of all creation.  
I reign through power that solidifies my station.  
    With almighty mind I entreat  
    those having stout enough feet  
    to walk my unpaved street  
seeking gold in their private constellation.

I made tides out of time by my own admission,  
then turned attention to fantastical invention:  
    man the incarnation of a dream,  
    after which I would teem  
    with convulsive ray and lustrous beam,  
the light and guide of their evolution.

I am master of life and bountiful ablution.  
Whoso thinks me imperfect suffers delusion.  
    My influence is great  
    so accept the fate  
    I designate  
or face consequences of endless commotion.

I neither gain nor lose during transition.  
I live at the core of every decision.  
    I neither chide nor praise nor quantify,  
    have only myself on which to spy.  
    Insubstantial theories do not apply.  
I am none other than the emperor of creation.

I am responsible for disease and malnutrition.  
I dissolve the dead without any contrition.  
    I am the prescience of presence,  
    essential effervescence  
    orchestrating your convalescence.  
I act stealthily to thwart irresponsible revision.

I will save you the need for blind supposition:  
I seek no reward nor adulation.  
    I am simply native cosmos  
    passed down through Knossos  
    absent ethos,

perhaps the omnipotent God you envision.







Fuck the sun. I haven't even been by the pool for ten minutes and I know that I'm already going to be burnt by the time I stand up. My mouth and throat are bone dry, I haven't had a drop of water in hours, not even to wash out the acidic taste of vomit. All of my muscles are aching, part from the drive out here, and part from the years without stretching. The shades don't do much to help with the pulsing pain behind my eyes either. And yet here I am. Palm Springs. Less than twelve hours ago I was navigating a bad trip by dissociating in my sister's bathroom. I cut all my hair off and thought of new names for myself. I also threw up in her shower. Sorry Sheila. Brushing my hand over the top of my head now it is comforting to feel the haphazard, spikey mess I left. A reminder of what I have gone through to get here. Brock. Brock would be good. A strong name for a strong man. Though I don't feel very strong, or very much like a man. That will come later. For now I'm still waiting on that screwdriver I ordered. No food, not yet. I'm not sure I can keep anything down. The faint smell of chlorine and the soft feel of the bathrobe remind me that I am in a new place, with new opportunities. The world will come calling for me, and I will answer, but not now.

The drive over here from Phoenix was rock bottom. Careening down the highway, the lights in front of me melting into each other. The highway is most hypnotic at night, and especially so when you're the only one on the road. A chance to breathe. With each exhale I let go of noxious fumes that had trapped themselves in me for a long time. I was engulfed in flame, wrapped up and absorbed into a warm cocoon. I can't remember all of it but I do know that I talked. On and on for hours upon hours I talked. Whispering, speaking, screaming into the night, hoping that I would find any way out of what I had known for years was coming. For years before that night I had denied the way I felt, incapable of understanding that what I was feeling was more than discomfort. In the car that night I felt myself wriggle out of the husk I had formed out of my old body. And as I sped down the road, flakes of my former self drifted out the

window and into the night. The wind rushed by me as I laid my foot down on the accelerator. Feeling the car go faster and faster, knowing the danger that losing control meant. My new form felt so fresh then, a nascent body with none of the obsessions and compulsions of its old host.

A breeze brings me back gently to the present. I realize how temporary that enlightenment was. The screwdriver is here, and as I sip it I am disappointed that it is mostly orange juice. Laying on this chaise lounge feels like laying in a hospital bed. My body is only “new” in the sense that I am seeing it differently. I am forging my new identity, pulling it from a crucible of imposed femininity and judgment. And things are already different. I remember the look that the man at the front desk gave me when I came in. It could’ve been the haircut, or the fact that my pupils were as big as dinner plates, but I have a sneaking suspicion he knew. Strangers seem to be especially potent at recognizing the slightest distress. My phone buzzes on the table beside me, it’s Sarah. I could put my phone on silent, try to ignore her for the rest of my life, but I don’t want that. I want what’s coming to me. The anger, the frustration, I deserve it all and more. As I stare at her contact image buzzing and vibrating on the table next to me, I consider the possibility that she won’t be mad. That she’ll just be happy I’m okay. I doubt that that’s true, but I suppose I can’t hide forever.



## **Xanadu**

lives in Iv, Space of Infinite Imagination, Public's  
Home 0.

It consists in publications, performances and  
exhibits in art, jazz and literary contexts.

## Cuban Cubisms ft Wifredo Lam (Sep 2022)

from **Guantanamera** (Cuban anthem)

My verse is clearly green  
and of a lit carmine  
my verse is a wound'd deer  
seek' shelter in the mount.

(Thanks to Google Translate)

Mi verso es un verde claro  
Y de un carmín encendido  
Mi verso es un ciervo herido  
Que busca en el monte amparo.

(posthumously composed and derived from three poems

of José Martí's 1891 *Versos sencillos* [*Simple Verses*])

(一)

**Mother and Daughter**

(二)

**The Third World**

(三)

**Wifredo Lam's Jungle**  
**A Compilation of Views**



(一)

## Mother and Daughter

Just a yellow line  
like Nazca lines are yellow  
like earth from a high height  
tells of rear rounds and angulars  
red head to  
triangulated chest

And holding her daughter  
in open hands to her lap  
while standing up up-  
right at the same time

Confusion of perspectives add up  
to Latino cubist conclusion.

*Xanadu (Of José Martí fame) for Havana (September 2022)*

*(Thanks to Wifredo Lam and his 1939 'Madre e hija'/'Mother and Daughter'  
in Museo de Bellas Artes de Cuba, Arte Cubano Havana and Café Czaar)*

(=)

## The Third World

(i)

Man-machine  
feet and birds  
eyes and faces  
up and down  
tumbling down  
in reversal  
of universe

Where absurd is easy  
and difficult is life  
living it the usual way  
beyond representation  
and abstraction  
that is in between  
falls Art

(ii)

From a distance  
bizarre forms and shapes  
look like dancing in a black night  
of empty void they have been  
born and worn from.

*Xanadu (Ofjosémartífame) for Havana (September 2022)*

*(Thanks to Wifredo Lam and his 1965-1966 'El Tercer Mundo'/'The Third World'*

*in Museo de Bellas Artes de Cuba, Arte Cubano Havana TS Eliot and La Zorro y El Cuervo)*



## **Wifredo Lam's Jungle**

### **A Compilation of Views**

.... questions of intelligibility and relative value in  
the international reception of exotic cultural forms ....

(Francisco-J. Hernández Adrián 2010)

Closeup caught up  
like claustrophobia  
arbitrarily stopped  
at border to NEWS\*

Like you're lost in the jungle  
cacophony of lianas and shrubs  
one may feel humidity (oh)  
like human humility (awe)

Like nature takes control again  
in mega biodiversity  
reduced to sober palette of pastels  
awaiting symphony of supportive

Rainforest life is alive  
its modernism could be replaced  
by figuration of tacit details  
like outdoors hyperrealism

As it may still be an  
naive undisclosed  
view of unbuttoned  
flower bud garden

Simultaneously suggesting concrete  
jungle of arising megapolises  
where roots are feet  
and stems are body parts

Covered by invisible foliage  
of near-future age of civilization

Conglomerisms of naivism  
cubism futurism surrealism  
if not successors of Chinese ideograms  
it may end up in hombre sincero's view

But then we may forget about  
subversive slavery and colonialism

and feet and bodies may change into  
African slaves on sugar cane plantages

'I wanted with all my heart to paint  
the drama of my country  
to disturb the dreams  
of the exploiters' (Wifredo Lam).

*Xanadu (Of José Martí's fame) for Havana (September 2022)*

*(Thanks to Wifredo Lam and his 1943 'The Jungle' MOMA New York NY)*

*\*North East West South*

## Cuban Cubisms (Alt II) (Sep 2022)

from **Guantanamera** (Cuban anthem)

My verse is clearly green  
and of a lit carmine  
my verse is a wound'd deer  
seek' shelter in the mount.

(Thanks to Google Translate)

Mi verso es un verde claro  
Y de un carmín encendido  
Mi verso es un ciervo herido  
Que busca en el monte amparo.

(posthumously composed and derived from

three poems of José Martí's 1891 *Versos*

*sencillos* [*Simple Verses*])

Three Poetical Portrayals of Art

from *Museo de Bellas Artes de Cuba*

(<https://www.bellasartes.co.cu/>)

I

**Gitana Tropical**

II

**Bathing Nymph ...**

III

**Slavery (Pt II)**

**Treachery of Reality**



# I

## Gitana Tropical

Aka Mona Lisa of Cuba

Fauvism of black of hairs and eyes

(adding Eastern details)

red of lips

(adding African hues)

blue and golden of dress

(adding orthodox of shrine)

green of leaves of background

(adding ecological horizons)

cubist gray of wall

(adding analytical view)

white of overdress

(adding conservative environs)

In these ways she bridges main oppositions of her age

just before evolution of 30s (she is—you are)

And many layers of brown wood

from high (inside) to dark (outside)

multiple composition

is doing the same as you could  
as we did  
eye survives  
just like she's Gitana!

Whose iconography Victor Manuel  
may have borrowed  
to add tropical shade  
from European fauvism  
one more time modernism

In the tropics the bright colors of Fauvism  
are real like cool of cubist ACs

Semiotropics translating modernism  
into global cross-cultural realism  
of tropical hub of (synthetic) Fauvism  
and temperate cool of (analytical) Cubism.

....

*(Thanks to Victor Manuel García 1929 'Gitana Tropical'*  
*in Museo de Bellas Artes de Cuba, Arte Cubano*  
*La Zorro y El Cuervo Havana and George Gershwin)*

## II

### Bathing Nymph (Alt II Pt I)

(i)

Girl balancing her body  
putting her left leg forward  
to have her toes touch  
water she's about to enter

As to test its temperature

(ii)

Leaning slightly to the left  
while her left arm's resting  
on a tree trunk support  
like her bathing towel

(iii)

Ancient ideal of sculpture

whose copies may also decorate  
Parque Independencia in Asunción  
telling about universal emotions

(iv)

Innocence of nudity  
exhibiting curiosity  
empirically touching  
upon water's flow of life

Like classicist truth's  
descending into reality.

....

*(Thanks to ... 'Bathing Nymph'*

*in Museo de Bellas Artes de Cuba, Arte Universal*

*Kilómetro Zero Havana and Antonio Canova)*

### III

## Treachery of Reality

### Slavery (Pt II)

.... For who would bear the whips and scorns of time,  
Th'oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,  
The pangs of dispriz'd love, the law's delay,  
The insolence of office ....

(from Hamlet's 'To Be or Not To Be' soliloquy)

Cubism meets Naivism

both taken as literal as

black skin to white dress

skintight at day and night

Factories and houses

their chimneys high

their doors low

from gray to red

She sits motionless as

if caught by whites' why's while

this time not to be abused  
by overwork but poverty

That was already there long ago  
but facial features tell more  
than herstory can bear  
which may be disclosed

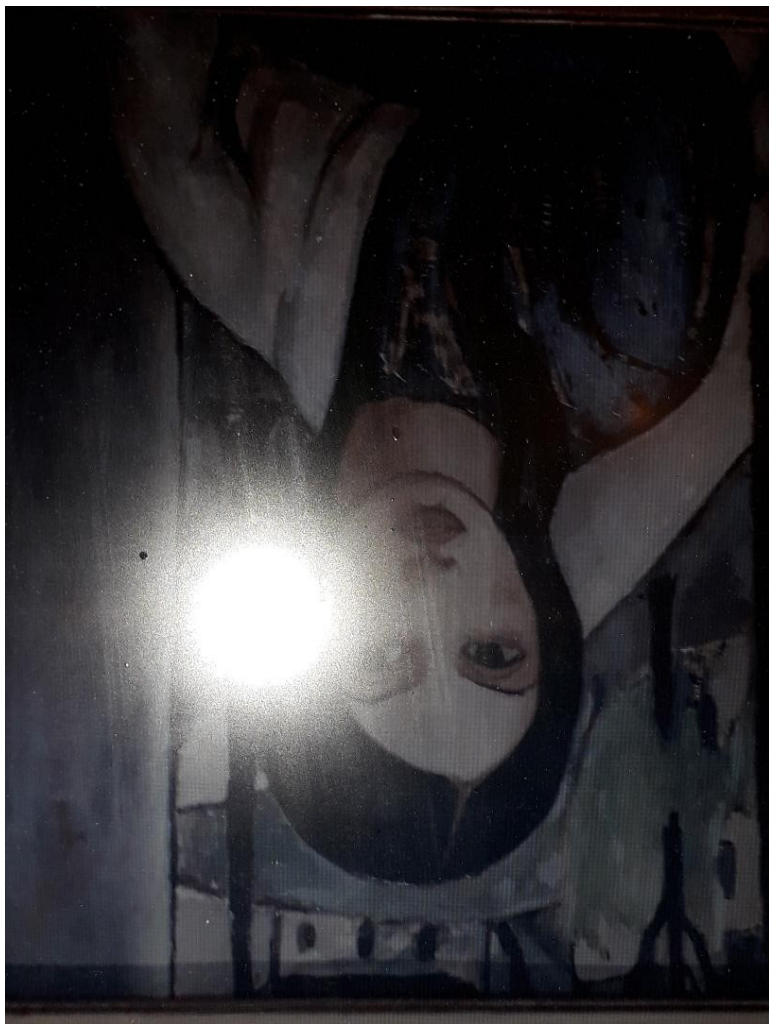
As on closer look until  
realism may betray poetics  
like demanding for  
reparations for slavery.

....

*(Thanks to Alberto Peña (Peñita) 1931 'Sin trabajo' ['No Job']*

*in Museo de Bellas Artes de Cuba, Arte Cubano Havana*

*William Shakespeare and ...)*



*García Tenebrism (Flash I) (June 2023)*



*Lam Tenebrism (Flash I) (June 2023)*







## Touchstones

Our thumbs are arguably the most useful appendage on our body. They are one of the primary things that set us apart from other animals. Who would give that up? Well, I would. And so would many others. The same people who make pilgrimages to the “Touchstone” would literally give their right thumb to be acknowledged by that infamous stone.

“I’m bored” My little brother said, scuffing his shoe on the curb. We had been standing in line for three hours. The line stretched around the block and about four miles but even from here we could see the monument.

“Have another drink of water,” My dad said, handing him the bottle. My entire family was here- except my Uncle Jim who was too frail to travel. My brother took the bottle but didn’t take a sip. We were here for me. The genius. The prodigy. The one who was going to get the silver pen.

Approval from the Touchstone meant fame. It meant fortune (ten million dollars to be exact). It meant you and your family were set for the rest of your lives. Essentially you were royalty. It meant your whole life changed. It meant that if you ran your hand along that smooth, clean stone engraved with the words of the ancients...you lost your thumb.

Singers would have their thumb replaced by a microphone. Artists would have it substituted with a brush. And I? I was hoping for the highest honor a young writer could have: a silver pen. Ever since my mom informed me, we were going to try for a silver pen, I had lain awake at night. I wondered if the silver pen meant I could never stop writing. I wonder if maiming myself for money would be worth it. And, understandably, I wondered if it would hurt. I think that’s only a natural question if you might get your thumb chopped off. But it was not enough to deter me (and all these other people) from coming to see if they were worthy.

Worthy of setting themselves apart. Worthy of the money. Worthy of the title. Worthy of being different. Conformity is for the masses and standing here among hundreds of other people I knew I was not one of them. I was just waiting for the Touchstone to confirm it.

## Hush

Rebecca stood in the kitchen doorway watching Caroline. She was six years old. Her golden curls framed her face making her appear more angelic than she was. Rebecca looked the part of the quintessential orphan and indeed four years earlier both her parents had perished in a car accident. Rebecca had been a pin-ball of the foster system....until Caroline and Mickey.

“Oh Ted, you shouldn’t have,” simpered Caroline in a tone that implied she was pleased he had done just that (which was open a fresh bottle of wine). She giggled as the handsome gentleman (who was *not* Mickey) poured the beverage into a glass and handed it to her. Rebecca had never seen Caroline like this. She was wearing a slinky red gown and entirely too much blush. Rebecca didn’t like it. Where was the Caroline that stumbled around in flannel pajamas and tucked her into bed?

Caroline was the one who wanted a child. Mickey could have gone either way. But when the doctor told her prospects didn’t look good (polycystic ovarian syndrome), she had taken to her bed in a most Victorian way. Mickey didn’t know what to do. So, he helplessly suggested adoption. Caroline jumped at the chance. And she fell in love with Rebecca at a glance. Or maybe it was just the golden ringlets.

Rebecca had not been standing there long when Ted caught sight of her.

“Jesus, Caroline, I thought we were alone. You didn’t tell me you had a child,” he said.

“Oh, she’s not my child,” Caroline spoke carelessly but her words cut deep for the six-year-old. Why was Mommy saying these things?

“All the same, I think it’s time for me to go,” Ted said, sounding uncomfortable. He began to edge to the door. Caroline, in desperation, clung to him.

“When will I see you again?” she asked.

“On your husband’s next business trip,” Ted said and gave her a kiss. Rebecca watched her lips touch his and knew something was wrong. That was something only Mickey did. And this man was not Mickey. She began to feel a queasy feeling in her stomach, like when she caught Ashley eating out of the candy jar.

Caroline watched her lover leave and then came over to the little girl. She bent down so her face was even with Rebecca’s. Then her mouth turned up in a horrible smile.

“Rebecca, I did you a favor by bringing you here. Now you must do me a favor. You can’t tell Mickey or I shall have to return you,” Still smiling that wide, horrible smile she said “Now go upstairs and I will run your bath”

## Sorrow Room

Lizelle hated 4 o'clock on Thursdays. It was now 3:29 and she sat at her bedroom window watching the rain crawl down her window. How appropo. Even the weather was mocking her.

There was a sharp rap on the door and Lizelle's mom, Felicity, stuck her head in. Lizelle didn't acknowledge her presence.

"We need to go. Get dressed, I'll be waiting downstairs," and Felicity was gone. As though it were costing her every ounce of energy, Lizelle pulled herself off the window seat and meandered over to the closet. She was tasked with her weekly challenge of how to look happy. In summer, it was easy. Pastels were her friend. Now the chilly winds of October had moved in. In the end, she selected a cardigan. Happy people wore cardigans, right?

Of course, there was the usual dilemma of dressing "honestly". "They want you transparent" her father had said once when he had too much to drink "They want to glance at you and know everything about you" Of course, as he kept telling Lizelle, they already knew everything about you. And they would not appreciate you trying to disguise your emotions. Lizelle wondered if she should change but there wasn't time.

It was about a fifteen-minute drive. Lizelle sat, passenger seat, staring out the window in stony silence. Felicity sighed heavily. “Do you have to act like this every time we go?”

Lizelle sighed too. “I hate it.”

Felicity shot her a warning look then said softly “Well none of us like it. But we all have to do it.”

“Why? It’s none of their business. Dad was right. They’re overreaching. It isn’t right.”

Felicity practically hissed, “Haven’t I told you to watch what you say? Even to me. It isn’t safe. Your father didn’t understand that. We need to be smarter than that.” Felicity lived in fear for the things her daughter was starting to say. Lizelle lay back in her seat and watched the rain again. She needed to pick her battles.

The center was probably the nicest building in town, paid for by taxpayer money of course. Lizelle resented everything about it from the comfy chairs to the small ceramic bowls with candy in them. It was all a front anyway. So, her father said. Then again, she was not supposed to listen to anything her father said. After



waiting half an hour, Theresa appeared in the doorway of the meeting room and ushered Lizelle inside.

Lizelle wasn't sure how she felt about Theresa. She had recently been assigned to Theresa when she turned fifteen and outgrew the "early adolescence" case worker. Lizelle decided that Theresa was one of those people who wanted to like her job but probably didn't. The fact that neither of them really wanted to be there comforted her slightly. Lizelle sat down at the opposite side of the table and immediately willed herself to sit still and not develop any nervous tics.

"Hello Lizelle. How was your week?"

"It was okay" Then Theresa whipped out the clipboard. It was time for business.

"Did you keep up with your emotions log?"

"Yes", Lizelle answered right away. Sometimes she decided not to do her math or reading. But her emotions log? That was always up to date. It had to be. She didn't want her mom to get an infraction.

"So how much time did you spend crying this week? Approximate. To the best of your ability"

Lizelle took a deep breath. “Two hours.”

Theresa looked up, alarmed. Lizelle knew this would happen.

Lizelle was not a crier. She channeled her pain into soccer or poetry. She was able to bounce back fairly quickly from setbacks. She didn’t wallow with chocolate or romantic comedies.

“It’s just—” Lizelle tried to explain it but Theresa held up her hand.

“We’ll go through the week bit by bit”

Lizelle and Michael had broken up after two years. It was a painful breakup, cemented by the fact he already had another girlfriend. How could he replace her that fast? Lizelle couldn’t help but resent the fact that the government wanted to know as well. It felt private and Lizelle felt her cheeks burn as she explained the situation to Theresa who nodded and shook her head in sympathy. At the end, there was a pregnant pause as Theresa looked over her clipboard.

“I am very sorry to do this to you, Lizelle, when you’ve already had such a hard week but I’m going to have to put you in the sorrow room for an hour.”

Lizelle’s heart immediately began to race.

“But I already cried two hours! That’s a lot right?” Theresa shook her head pityingly.

“Unfortunately our statistics say you should be crying three hours a week after such a traumatic breakup. You were together two entire years. Your emotions should reflect that. We are just trying to balance you out” It was just crap. The load of it. Her dad was right. They weren’t interested in making you feel better at all.

Theresa was watching her carefully in case Lizelle spontaneously flipped the table or something. Instead Lizelle bit her lip and let Theresa lead her into the sorrow room, which she had only been in once before, when they took her dad away. Theresa turned on the TV, flipped the lights, squeezed Lizelle’s shoulder and left. Lizelle watched as the TV flickered to life.

*No one else will ever date you. He dumped you because you are ugly. Maybe he was cheating the entire time. What you had was never real. He never loved you. Who could love you?* Messages flashed across the screen.

At first Lizelle stared defiantly at the TV. No, she would not be reduced to this. She would not let herself be a pawn in this tug of war. She was master of her own emotions.

Then they showed pictures of Michael's Facebook page posing with his new girlfriend, both looking so happy and Lizelle felt herself crumple. She reached for one of the three tissue boxes on the table in front of her. She had been determined to keep herself in check. Now she just let go.

Lizelle sat in the atrium waiting for her mother to pick her up. She was biting her fingernails, something she hadn't done since she was twelve. She didn't feel sad anymore. In fact, she actually didn't feel anything, the tears still drying on her face.



